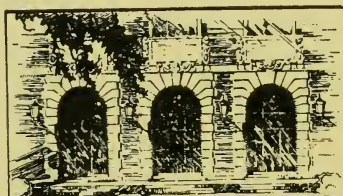


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OBERON SPELL.



VOL. III.



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OBERON SPELL.

A Novel.

BY

EDEN ST. LEONARDS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1869.

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LONDON :
SAVILL, EDWARDS AND CO., PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

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CONTENTS

OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A BRACE OF WEDDINGS	1
II. THE STRUGGLE TO LIVE	13
III. IRIS PROVES HERSELF A SUCCESSFUL MATCH- MAKER, AND SOMETHING MORE	27
IV. SOME OF OUR LEADING CHARACTERS PASS IN REVIEW	38
V. THE CUBBORNS, MOTHER AND SON	47
VI. THE COUNTESS SUMMERS FALLS SICK.—THE BROOCH TURNS UP ONCE MORE	56
VII. THE CUBBORNS AGAIN—MOTHER AND SON .	71
VIII. THE CUBBORNS AND EARL SUMMERS . . .	76
IX. EARL SUMMERS, THE MARQUIS OF LORN- DALE, AND MRS. CUBBORN	91
X. THE CONSPIRACY IS DISCUSSED — WITH WHAT RESULT	107

CHAP.	PAGE
XI. IRIS SPELL TRIES TO CONVERT MRS. CUBBORN	118
XII. MRS. CUBBORN AND HER SON	139
XIII. THE ARTIST	149
XIV. A WONDERFUL REVELATION	167
XV. HUGH GRAFF CHANGES HIS RELIGION AND DIES	187
XVI. OBERON FALLS SICK—IRIS BECOMES HIS DOCTOR	197
XVII. THE COUNTESS SUMMERS	208
XVIII. EARL SUMMERS AND CHARLOTTE WIN- STANLEY	218
XIX. THE DISCOVERIES	229
XX. FURTHER DISCOVERIES STILL	238
XXI. THE PROOF NEARS COMPLETION	246
XXII. A CHAPTER OF EVIL	258
XXIII. THE OLD DIPLOMATIST AND THE YOUNG DIPLOMATISTS	273
XXIV. RETRIBUTION	286
XXV. THE CONCLUSION	296

OBERON SPELL.

CHAPTER I.

A BRACE OF WEDDINGS.



SPRING had come round, and Mr. Lever was once more at home in the bosom of his family. He was delighted with the progress of Hugh Graff, and was not sorry to find that all connexion with the Spells was now broken off; for he, like the rest of the world, had begun to regard Oberon as little better than a swindler and a ruffian—a compound of his father-in-law and his own reckless nature. A round of dinners and entertainments was given. The guests always included several Academicians, and the leading Associates, and at times the President, with as many of the great patrons of art as Mr. Lever could assemble in his mansion. Among these were to be found not only Mr. and Mrs. Cubborn and their son Jonathan, but the eminent jeweller, Mr. Abraham Swivel, and the great foreign merchants, Messrs. Wolfstein and Schnapps. The parties we have named, laid out annually thousands in the purchase of choice pieces of sculpture and

the best pictures, not forgetting to give the modern school a very prominent preference. It is true, the works of art were only so much property, and might some day be disposed of at an enormous profit ; but they conferred on the owner a title to be regarded as a patron of the fine arts, and it was in this character that the honourable group we have signalized above were constantly invited to Mrs. Lever's great parties.

Caroline Lever had grown more learned and more accomplished, but her attractions had not increased. Still, people would persist in calling Graff a lucky fellow. The lady was an only child, and would bring with her a very large fortune, and this was deemed almost by everyone sufficient to make up the prospects of a happy and highly eligible marriage. All preliminaries being finally settled and minor matters quietly disposed of, the wedding day at last was named. The invited were to be numerous, but still select and influential. It was arranged that no member of the bridegroom's family should be present. The little difficulty in this was skillfully got over by occupying the good people—father, mother, and that interminable family of the Graffs—in giving a grand banquet to their neighbours at Edelstone on the auspicious day of the great painter's wedding. As for Hugh himself, he bore the approaching change with the calmest serenity. He had no heart to give away to anyone ; but if there was an affection lurking there, it certainly burned for Iris, the beautiful. There was no flicker, no spark of life or warmth, for the estimable

lady he was about to lead to the hymeneal altar. For that lady herself, it must be said that she experienced little feeling beyond the flutter of preparation in regard to a very important change. Her heart had been given, or rather gave itself, long ago to Oberon Spell. She could not but with feminine instinct perceive and interpret Hugh Graff's coldness and policy under the cover of an undeviating gentleness and tranquillity. Her own sentiments were, it is true, equally indifferent and sedate. But this match somehow had obtained a real place and meaning without any formal thought, or intention, or liking on her part. The idea got to be entertained and recognised in the family. Her father and mother strongly approved of the young artist and of the union; and she—poor women! what choice can they well have?—she consented. Hugh Graff had her parents' approval; he would make her as good a husband as any one else—perhaps a better; no doubt she would get in time to like him—to love him; and fortunately she had many resources within herself, and would not be dependent on his attentions, affection, money, or labours; so that no matter how things should turn out, she would not be seriously affected.

The happy day at length came. St. George's, Hanover Square, as a place of *éclat* and fashion, was the sacred edifice selected. Jonathan Cubborn was Hugh Graff's best man. He did not look very imposing or handsome, but neither did the bride or bridegroom. It was a matter-of-fact marriage. There was a grand wedding breakfast, and the usual

toasts and speeches. The guests were numerous, and some of them, out of consideration for the engineer, were truly distinguished and fashionable people. The day itself, a warm, sunny one in early May, was delightful. The Spells were not thought of save by the pair at the altar—each in a different way—Hugh thinking of Iris, and Caroline of Oberon, as they severally pronounced those solemn, irrevocable vows. And so the bridal passed away as a very, very happy one—one of congenial tastes, dispositions, sentiments, and pursuits; and it so happened that some of the truly fair damsels present were, when all was over, dissolved in tears of regret, that out of all this world's joy and felicity their blissful hour had not yet arrived; and they were grieved and miserable, and, it shames us to say, secretly, very secretly indeed, envious of Caroline's good fortune. So much for the insight and wisdom of poor weak mortals, and the fanciful sorrows of a self-torturing world.

But another marriage, too, was on the *tapis*—one of grander proportions—of higher auspices—of greater importance and moment. Ernestine Wheatley was to become the wife of Earl Summers.

Time, after all, is the great disenchanter—the capital corrector. Years wore on, and Ernestine Wheatley's passion for the handsome and gifted Oberon Spell had become like a dream to her mind. She could never think of him otherwise than with pleasurable emotions, but these were now very distant and vague, far separated from the scenes,

thoughts, and occupations of the rank in which she moved. Her marriage with Earl Summers came on as a matter of course. He was not, it is true, a young nobleman of whom her father approved, but he was connected with her mother's family—the Edelstone estate would not pass from that line. Moreover, he was very agreeable in his manners, was admitted to be handsome, although he could never pretend to the commanding majesty which made Oberon Spell supreme among men as well as women, until a blighted character came to darken and mar the noblest gifts of mental and material nature, a comprehensive mind and original genius, and a well-moulded, vigorous, and healthy frame. Earl Summers, too, possessed and felt a kind of love for Ernestine Wheatley, and could exercise persuasive modes of showing his affection. It was whispered, indeed, by many, and known to a few, that the young nobleman was extravagant, somewhat in debt, and too much of a libertine to make any woman happy; but in these respects he did not appear to differ very much from other scions of his rank and station, and people who took the trouble to think on the matter, believed that he would make in time an excellent husband, for a nobleman, redeem his extravagances and errors, and beget also lawful heirs to a very large property. Whatever his faults may have been—and there were serious faults—the alliance was determined on, and Ernestine Wheatley prepared her mind, not without misgivings, to perform the duties of a pure and faithful wife, sworn through life by the most solemn

sacrament ever to pursue and vindicate her husband's interests and honour.

But even here there was to be a foreshadowing and a warning. It so happened that about a week before the wedding, the beautiful young heiress was passing alone at midday from Priory Park to the village of Edelstone, at the very same moment of time Oberon Spell had to make arrangements with the tenant of Myrtle Cottage, and was approaching in a contrary direction to the betrothed lady. The two saw one another long before they actually met, and had sufficient interval to prepare their thoughts for the rencontre, and decide their conduct and action in a peculiar and embarrassing situation. Both were wonderfully changed. Oberon had grown more full and grand; always tall and stalwart, since he had settled into manhood, there was that firmness and pose when at rest, and that ease and perfect grace when in motion, which a more mature prime brings to the human figure and form. Ernestine had lost all the characteristics of the lissome young girl. She had become a lofty, aristocratic lady, authority blended with affability in her countenance, action, language, and manners, and a calm dignity and stateliness in her deportment and carriage so eminently classical. Her lineaments, it might be, had grown rather too severe and haughty, but about the mouth and in the eyes there was a subdued, sweet, and tender expression, which indicated that the heart's deep seat was not indurated or cold, but filled with the kindest and gentlest feelings towards all her fellow-creatures. One

could not see the trace of an evil passion lurking in that distinguished and elegant mould of features. If ever Ernestine Wheatley had experienced strong emotions, they had all passed away, and for years a certain apathy, rather than any defined or active affection, was the characteristic of her condition.

As the twin models of statuesque beauty neared one another, a slight blush just glanced across the lady's pale countenance, but it soon vanished, and she lowered her parasol to conceal the transient perturbation which had affected her. When within about a yard of Ernestine, Oberon raised his hat respectfully, and was about to proceed forward on his journey. There was nobody on the road, and the meeting—broad midday as it was—would be quite lonely.

"No, Mr. Spell, no ; we shall not pass one another with this distance and strangeness. How do you do?" and Ernestine stretched forth her hand to the poet. Oberon gently pressed the hand given him with such cordiality, and said—

"Oh, Miss Wheatley, I would have given worlds for this moment to tell you alone of all others that I am not the being slander has represented me."

"I do not dream of it. I could never believe that you could falsify yourself. I know and feel you could not. You may have been unfortunate, Mr. Spell, but that is all ; dishonourable or base you are not, and could not be."

"That is high eulogy from such lips. I fervently, deeply thank you. Our lot in life is fixed

by a Higher Power, Miss Wheatley ; mine is determined, and I and those dear to me must strive to be happy."

"By an earnest and honest discharge of our duty in whatever state we are called to, we shall be so, Mr. Spell. But tell me, what has become of your grand poem? Where have you been all this time? I looked forward to the perusal of your works one day, but above all to the poem of which so many fragments are in my own album?"

It was so long since Oberon had heard a word of his poems, if not to hear them derided and derided, that something like a tear to his eye and a choking in his throat came as Ernestine spoke. However, he in a moment bravely recovered himself.

"Poetry I have laid aside for the present. It is a luxury which I cannot afford. I am now only an obscure journalist, one of the creators and guides of public opinion, earning, so long as I have the power to write, a subsistence. But that suffices to maintain my family, and I am satisfied."

"And how many children have you?"

"Two boys ; noble creatures, so everyone says ; mere babes as yet, but of wonderfully striking appearance."

"A great gift, Mr. Spell ; and how is your wife, the fair Iris Dove, of the village of Edelstone?"

"Well ; but grown somewhat sad and serious by many griefs, and perhaps by my life of obscure labour."

"Ah, one would think she would find comfort

there, her heart's best comfort in comforting you ; but our natures are so different. I am glad we have met and spoken, Mr. Spell. The opportunity may not occur again, but it has not been lost. Under all chances and changes—I see some persons coming this way—under all chances and changes, I say, God bless you.”

“ From my heart I repeat the benediction,” said Oberon, once more pressing the hand placed in his, and the two separated.

Perhaps it had been better for both—for the lady, certainly—if they had not met.

But their adieus did not escape the notice of Hugh Graff and Jonathan Cubborn, for it was they who were approaching up the lane in deep conversation.

Oberon went forward with his back turned to them, and Ernestine Wheatley pursued her track till they came near her ; she then looked a quiet, cold look of slight recognition at the painter, and, both raising their hats deferentially, the heiress passed on to the village.

“ Oh ! this is the way they do it, is it ?” said Jonathan Cubborn to his companion, who now walked on very slowly, at every step increasing the distance between himself and Oberon. At length he said, drawing a deep breath—

“ It is a pity his wife, Iris, does not know of his deep tricks.”

“ Or Lord Summers of the tricks of both,” said the attorney. “ However, the knowledge of what has occurred will be useful. You will remember

the date and the place and hour. Make a note of it, Graff."

"I will be sure to do so," was Hugh's reply, and both continued their walk, conversing in low whispers on the various plans and schemes which each was pursuing according to the bent of his own mind, united in their determination to ruin Oberon Spell. We leave them to their evil machinations, and turn to a gayer, if not a happier, scene.

The 12th of July, the day of Ernestine's wedding, came. The bells rang out merrily in Edelstone, in the Ravines, in Erlam Court, in Blackmines, in Colambeach, the seat of the aged Marquis of Lorn-dale, and in various picturesque and beautiful spots in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, the immediate property of the bride and bridegroom, or of their near relations. Here was a noble and eligible alliance indeed—rank, wealth, and beauty on both sides, and the sanction of parents and friends. There was, too, a strong sense of resignation and duty on the part of the lady; and the youthful earl believed he loved, he certainly greatly admired, the wife of his choice. With all this affection, he would not have trammelled himself so soon in marriage, but that his debts pressed him heavily, and he took a lordly interest in the prospect of a legitimate heir to his vast estates. These motives, almost unknown to himself, constituted the real attractions of the union, perhaps in this respect not differing much from other husbands of a like rank and under similar circumstances.

The wedding unquestionably was a gay and fes-

tive scene throughout more than one rich and extensive domain in the United Kingdom. Ten thousand pounds did not cover the outlay on the days of rejoicing. The breakfast in St. James's-square, the town residence of Sir Roger Wheatley, was the costliest and most luxurious, and withal effective banquet which the resources of Gunter could provide. The company included many among the leading nobility of both sexes, some members of the Cabinet, including the prime minister; quite a galaxy of fashionables, young and old, and the usual gathering of foreign ambassadors, on what was considered by them an important occasion. Among the guests was the bridegroom's father, the venerable Marquis of Lorndale, now past his eightieth year, and his eldest son, Earl Landon, our minister plenipotentiary at the court of Russia. There seldom was a more brilliant assemblage at a marriage. Then the presents were of a very costly and generally of a highly artistic description. Their enumeration occupied a full quarter of a column of the *Morning Post*, and comprised among the givers some of the noblest names in the kingdom, including, in one or two instances, royalty itself.

But even this festal scene had its shadows. Fierce suns, deluges of rain, and frequent unseasonable gusts of wind, caused many disasters throughout the metropolis and country, and marred many of the bridal feasts and revels. The event was marked and noted only as a time of hail, rain, and storm in the calendar, and left no other permanent record or character. Mrs. Cubborn, too, and her son, were

seen hovering about Edelstone, more active than usual in making observations and forecasting omens. They prognosticated a rich harvest of advantages to themselves from the marriage of Ernestine Wheatley and Earl Summers. This was the second union without a heart and with evil-boding which recently took place among the persons of our drama.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRUGGLE TO LIVE.



Y ! the struggle to live ! How many great spirits are broken in the effort ! How many brave hearts crushed ! How many worthy men sink and are undone ! How many thorough labourers are unequal to the strife ! To keep house and family—to maintain a wife and children, and not be churlish or unnatural and cruel to relations—how very much does it require at man's energetic and willing hands ! and, in truth, how very few of the toilers are enabled to achieve their end in satisfaction and peace ! There is always an obstacle—a *non-possumus*—which cannot be overcome. And so the struggler, and those near and dear to him, are in constant hot water, live from hand to mouth, are always at shifts and contrivances, and never comfortable and happy.

Oberon was a journalist ; he had settled down to that obscure way of life—to that profession of anonymity ; he was compelled by a hundred adverse circumstances to work for the public in darkness, and this for a premium little raised above the earnings of a clever artizan. He had removed long ago from Kensington Gardens to a small cottage at Bayswater. Some six years rolled on in newspaper drudgery, and this period was not without its preg-

nant events to all the characters of our story. But we are not writing a chronological history, or even a biography. We are snatching a few pages from the memoirs of Oberon Spell, leaving the others to oblivion, or to the pen of a more consecutive and faithful narrator.

Oberon is now the father of a large family. He has four boys and three girls, all strong and healthy and active of limb, and he is likely soon to have an increase to the number. They are eminently handsome children—the boys softened by their mother's beauty, the girls ennobled by their father's grandeur of mien, carriage, and feature. It is a heavy charge is this family, all to keep in comfort, with some degree of style, and a provident eye to the future. A thousand a year may do this tolerably well; but that is not a jot too much. Oberon had to maintain his wife, his children, his mother, two servants, and himself on a bare five hundred. His mother's income and his own earnings put together did not realize more than that sum. But even this was not always certain; there were years when the journalist's own labours did not produce more than a hundred pounds, or a small balance over. There was one year of actual loss—loss even, in maps, books, and paper, and the other necessary materials of a public writer. But still the family had to live—to live as Iris Spell would have them live, not extravagantly, but unwilling or unable to put her expenditure down to within the limited margin of their income. The natural consequences ensued. First, there was a constant selling out of

stock ; it was very perilous work, but inevitable ; those dear children must be kept and educated, kept in health too ; for the doctor, except on unavoidable occasions, was a comparative stranger in the house of Oberon Spell. Iris, moreover, was a rather extravagant dresser, she loved display now as much as she did when a girl ; and then she had those glorious boys and lovely girls to set off—babes as some of them were—to the best, that is, the most showy advantage ; and Oberon also had to meet her whims as to himself, and clothe himself, if not in the height of the fashion, at least with two completely new suits a year. Mrs. Spell's costume was of the old, quiet, neat, and faultless character ; Deborah followed the pattern of her mistress : her vesture was appropriate, fitting her position and calling, always clean and tidy, and strong in material, but never aping the drawing-room. As to the other servant, her wages were generally all sunk in the draper's shop, the dressmaker's and milliner's bills ; relying upon any waifs or perquisites which might turn up, for the costly article of boots and shoes *à la mode de* Regent-street. No house could be maintained in this style without a good and steady income, or that terrible expedient—to prey upon the future ; or, worse still, the dreary prospect of accumulated debt. A money-lender was found. They are not difficult to be met with ; there are hundreds of apparently respectable and wealthy men, who pass as solicitors doing a large business, who in reality are only usurers, and usurers of the worst character ; they hold the instrument of oppression

in their own hands, and employ it mercilessly to grind the last penny out of their unfortunate victims. It is only wonderful that such men are ever permitted to move in society, that a black mark, a forbidden ban is not set upon them. But so strong is the force of pelf, that the lawyers we have mentioned have most of them actually a freer ingress into houses than the regular practitioner, who having no secrets of private difficulties to worm out, confines himself to the steady and respectable business of his profession.

Mr. Rasper was a solicitor of Gray's Inn, long established there, having occupied the same chambers for upwards of thirty years; almost his sole occupation had been that of a money-lender. This raised him to opulence, and made him a director of one influential public company and a large shareholder in many others. The respectability of Mr. Rasper was never questioned; his name was good for thousands—that was always sufficient.

This accommodating individual, having ascertained the exact state of Oberon Spell's affairs from his own lips, and by a written document which he was careful to preserve, did not hesitate to advance the necessary funds to free him from debt, taking a good interest and irrefragable security, with such ample law costs as must make the branch of the profession he was pursuing very safe and lucrative. We call it a branch of an attorney's profession, not that the practice of money lending is universal among solicitors, but it is only too general and, in fact, too professional.

Now Oberon Spell was by no means ignorant of the danger he incurred by accepting the kind of accommodation Mr. Rasper offered. He saw the gulf only too clearly and well for his peace. But how could he avoid it? More economy could not be practised in the family without that show of meanness and poverty which he knew would make Iris most miserable. He trusted however to his own increased exertions to pay off the borrowed money, and then he promised himself that in future he could entirely escape such a hazardous experiment. But what has often happened occurred here; the struggling, energetic, honest man of intellect and labour overworked himself; his brain now gave way, his writings were returned on his hands, or kept unacknowledged, and not inserted. Oberon Spell was not mad—far from it—nor had he become imbecile; he was simply used up, he required a long rest from anxiety and mental toil.

It was in this emergency that Iris suggested to the man who abhorred idleness, and who would not stoop to string together sentences without thought or meaning, that literature was not really his vocation, that he had tried it long enough, and had entirely failed in it as a calling. There were Mr. A., and Mr. B., and Mr. C., and Mr. D.; the names, 'tis true, were not very many, but they had all succeeded in making a fortune by their pen, and obtaining distinction. But as to Oberon, poor Oberon, with his utmost efforts, and with an incessant wear and tear of mind, and the privation of nearly all enjoyment, he could barely make, when in

full mental vigour and occupation, and paid the regulation fees, only from four to five hundred a year. And how seldom had he made that! and how long was it since he had earned anything at all! It was plain that Oberon had committed a grand mistake in life; it was not literature, but the man himself—the fancied poet, the would-be author, the struggling, incompetent journalist—that was at fault. No one fails in this world who follows his proper bent and vocation. Look at Hugh Graff, for example, Iris would say—ah, that indeed was a case in point!—he was a true painter, a genius born for art, not stuffed or patched up for it, and what had he become? the wealthy, the admired, the successful Royal Academician, the happy husband; no, she would not say altogether happy—there was a hitch there—but, at all events, the husband of Caroline Graff, the rich engineer Mr. Lever's daughter. It was no use trying it on any longer in this way. She hated books, and essays, and reviews, and leading articles; a good novel was well enough, but that, forsooth, he would not condescend to write, or could not write, very likely, if he tried; but her horror were blue books, and debates, and reports, and maps, and plans, and facts, and figures, and all that stuff and nonsense of a concoction, which goes into the big "we" of a newspaper. They may call them leading articles indeed, and guides and creators of public opinion, but to her way of thinking they were only the blind attempting to lead a wide-awake people, who can think and see for themselves. Why, there was more sense in

her own father—more real practical knowledge and reason—than in all the journalists of London and the provinces put together; and such would be found to be the case with business men in general, the thrivingness and ability of the world, Oberon may be assured, rested with them.

Oberon had still left plenty of brain for business, because that was his natural calling. And after all it did not require much thought or study. She had known the stupidest boobies at school make first-rate shopkeepers and warehousemen, and there was no end to the successful merchants who had failed to pick up the necessary knowledge for barristers, engineers, doctors, and parsons. They very wisely took to trade, what they were fit for, and they have their reward in splendid fortunes and fine houses, carriages for their wives, and all that. Let Oberon only do the same—just take to what Nature had intended him to follow, commerce of some kind, and they would soon get out of these dreadful difficulties.

Such is a brief—but only a very brief—summary of the daily and sometimes, we regret to add, nightly lecture and objurgation poor Oberon Spell was accustomed to receive from his too loving partner, when it chanced that his brain had got overwrought and unfitted for the strong mental exertion required for the journalist, and the labourer in general periodical literature.

Iris succeeded. He began to think he was a bad son, husband, and father—somehow a very guilty creature; if not an idler, at least a dawdler; a

barren, unprofitable follower of his own selfish fancies, and of a most miserable calling. He had been told long ago by common-sense, practical Horace, that if he would live in respectability, virtue, and honour, he must get money :—

“Omnis enim res,
Virtus, fama, decus, divina, humanaque pulchris
Divitiis parent.”

“Beautiful riches!” ay, he must get them; the only lovely, holy, virtuous, pious, honourable things in this world—he must get riches somehow.

So the poet was at length driven forth to the city on business. He was told that at first he must not bid too high, he must humble himself and trample on false pride and shame; all the great fortunes were made from small beginnings: that rich warehouseman began by sweeping out the very place he now governed as his own, in the mean capacity of a porter; that millionaire wholesale grocer was a footman, cleaning knives in Devonshire, when his two brothers invited him up to share the business which they had created, commencing as errand-boys. That——but we must stop; it was all a history of something from nothing, a veritable proof of how much might be accomplished by perseverance, that was the grand quality, perseverance. It was only not to be discouraged, but to keep on, doggedly on, and not to be too strict or restrained by any fudge of principle, and not to mind what people said, or thought, or did, and money would flow in in abundance by-and-by.

"And you know your own words, dear," said Iris, in her most winning manner, when she was spiring up her husband for his first day's venture; "it is a beautiful passage—there, let me repeat it to you, it will cheer you on and give you confidence. Let me see;—yes—

' All victory is struggle—using chance
And genius well; all bloom is fruit of death;
All good just sacrifice; and life's success'—

" Mind,—

' and life's success
Is rounded up of integers of thrift
From toil and self-denial. Men must work
And strive if they would conquer—slaves are sloths.
Who rules himself calls no man master and
Commands success even in the throat of fate.'

"There, love, that is charming because it is true, and points clearly to business. Have you your little bag of samples, dear? God bless you, Oberon. Kiss your papa all round, my darlings. Oh! I augur much good from this great—this noble mission of honest labour. Again!—there! (kissing him). Once more God bless you, dear, and prosper you!"

The *novus homo*, the man new to the trade, took a turn or two from the door, with a shrinking, guilty feeling, and was soon with a crowd of others, energetic men, who were hurrying to the city in and outside an omnibus. Oberon chose his seat quietly in the further inside corner. He never in his life was in a sadder or more serious mood. It struck him ominously that neither his mother nor Deborah came to wish him good-bye at his departure. The

one was in tears in her own room ; the other, heavy at heart at this miserable change in her young master's destiny, was pursuing her kitchen-work in silence.

Oberon had undertaken to do business for a commission agent, a Mr. Gawkner—half-Yankee half-Englishman—who ostensibly dealt in yarns, but in reality took commissions in the general Manchester, or indeed, any line. Our hero was to get a half per cent. for business actually done and approved of, half the money earned to be retained until the orders were settled for, the cash received. This mark of liberality was in consideration of the new-comer being, it was understood, rather hard-up for the needful. The language of city business is special, and Oberon had to listen to quite a new English dialect.

The duty he had to perform was to call upon wholesale houses and tempt them by every conceivable argument, truth or lie, it did not matter which so long as it told, to give “a line,” as the phrase runs. Oberon began with true courage ; he summed-up all the heroic deeds that heroic men, ancient and modern, had ever ventured to perform for their families, and he resolved not to be outdone by any one of them in self abnegation and exertion. He accordingly stalked into a warehouse, and asked for Mr. Skidder, the head of the haberdashery department. He was directed upstairs through a whole wilderness of bales and packets, and videttes composed of quick, bustling, observant men, who spoke among one another by the eye rather than by

the lips or ordinary language. At length by dint of inquiry he came upon Mr. Skidder: that important personage appeared to be quite at leisure, he was rubbing his hands, and seemed in good humour. Incidentally we may remark that Mr. Skidder, though considered a capital business man, was ill able to write, and mis-spelt many words of what he did write. However, he was always to the point, and he made very few commercial mistakes; in fact, he was quite competent to the work set before him, to turn as much money as possible out of his department into the treasury. Oberon approached the great man with a smile on his lips, it was a sad one, enforced, but for all that it was a smile. He was resolved not to spoil the business by any bungling or error. The man of intellect we know was tall and imposing in appearance, Mr. Skidder could not have been above four feet and a-half at the uttermost; but for all that he looked up with an air of great self-importance and authority, as little people will. Just as our commission agent advanced to show his samples of tapes and threads, a dapper man presented himself, a trimming seller from Shoreditch. Oberon was first, and thought it only natural he should be first attended to, he therefore leaned forward and displayed his samples, but Mr. Skidder waved him back and looked him back with supreme contempt and scorn, at the same time putting forth his hand most cordially to greet the approaching customer.

“I wish those people,” said he, loud enough to be heard by Oberon, “I wish those people would

not bother just now at the pressing hour of business ; 'tis such a nuisance. Pray, my good feller, do keep back, I'll attend to you, if you please, after customers are served. I do wonder at Gawkner, to send such greenhorns out with samples. A beautiful morning, Mr. Shardnotch."

On receiving this rude rebuff, Oberon Spell turned on his heel and quickly departed, leaving his small parcel behind him. The call of "Here ! you have forgotten something," from Skidder, was entirely unheeded.

In this way our new man of business went to two or three warehouses, all in different parts of the city, though not far off, and met with something like the same description of reception and insult. One looked at his samples, which were of another kind from those shown to Skidder, very narrowly, and looked at him still more narrowly ; and then, shaking his head, turned his back and said nothing. Another, the moment he saw Oberon, said—

"Oh ! some new-comer," and laughed. "Thankee, not to-day. We want nothing."

Another,—but it would be painful to pursue the dreary category. There were no buyers, no "lines," no business done, nor was there likely to be. The morning's work was degrading and profitless, a hideous blunder in life's struggle, "And yet," said Oberon, with a sigh, "these fellows, with cant for their language, or cunning glances, and who have no possible claim to the status of gentlemen, have from 500*l.* to 1000*l.* a year, while I, with my utmost exertions in literature and journalism, cannot, or

rather could not, get more than an average 350l." He returned to Mr. Gawkner, who by this time was heated by repeated libations of sherry. He kept a stock in hand to treat his customers, and always joined them in a spirit of true cordiality.

"Ah! you are come back, Spell. Well, done any good?" Mr. Gawkner was sipping a glass of wine to himself. "How many lines, eh?"

Oberon put down his bag, drew forth his samples still left him, and said—

"Mr. Gawkner, I regret to say I could do nothing."

"I thought so when I sent you out; I hope you have not damaged the connexion. You are not up to the thing, I see. It was ridiculous in Prodds to recommend me such a chap; some of his poor dependents, or debtors, I suppose. Well, sir, I have nothing more to say; leave your samples, don't take them off. You may go. Come, Giffins, what have you done?"

"Capital, I think. Oh! such a lark! Didn't I do old Squeams with them there umbrellers!"

What more was advanced to recommend Mr. Giffins, Oberon could not collect, for no sooner had Gawkner uttered the last word than he disappeared from his store, one small room in Ferret-lane, Cheapside, crammed with goods of almost every description.

"I may be doomed," said Oberon; "the hand of heaven may be heavy upon me, but this is a forbidding life, one of fraud and lies, one of servility and meanness, one of ignorance and presumption! It was not designed for me; I will not follow it."

Iris heard her husband's story at night on his return, and deemed him impracticable ; however he had, notwithstanding, a fond and kind reception from her, his mother, and his children and servants.

Oh ! how blessed was that home ! How different from that busy thoroughfare where the poor commission-agent had wandered — the great city, he being the true Arab of that desert to him. Could he retain his home, now so doubly precious ? That was the question.

Oberon was out of employment, incapable of pursuing his literary avocations. The lease of his house was mortgaged, there was a bill of sale on his furniture, his own stock and that of his mother were both sold out, whatever other property they had had was all gone. Rasper, the money-lender, was a summary man ; strict to his rule, stern in the exaction of his pound of flesh, he had never been known to give in ; and yet now the day was approaching when all would be seized upon, foreclosed and sacrificed, unless an enormous debt could be paid off.

CHAPTER III.

IRIS PROVES HERSELF A SUCCESSFUL MATCH-MAKER,
AND SOMETHING MORE.



BERON SPELL, the man of genius, the man of love, the man of religion, the man of honour, the man of labour, the man of learning and intelligence, the true nobleman, had no earthly resource; he stood desolate: and there was that beautiful wife, and that tender mother, whose property was all gone; and those charming, endearing children, and that homestead, now on the brink of ruin! What could he do?—what was to be done?

“What can I do, dear Iris—what can I do? I will do anything but that vile commission business—anything. It is, you must admit, the first time of my life I have turned to you for counsel as to what I am to do for bread for us all!”

“Well, dear,” said Iris, placing her hand on his shoulder—reaching to it, although she herself was tall—“well, dear, though it is not exactly the first time, there is no occasion to despair, my advice is ready. The day of doom with Rasper is not till Tuesday next; this is Thursday, a world may be lost or won by that time, and certainly our small home and my dear husband saved. I think—I think I see my way somewhat indistinctly, but still

a way out of the difficulty. True, I require co-operation; your mother must co-operate, you must co-operate. I must have *my* way, that is all."

Iris had long been meditating a scheme by which she could shake off the horrible shackles of Rasper, and bring in a large accession of capital to the family. She turned her eyes to Mrs. Spell, and in her she thought she discovered her Eldorado.

Martha Spell was still a comely woman, possessed of the most amiable and endearing qualities and endowed with many accomplishments. She had passed a long life of widowhood, watching over her son, and not in the remotest manner ever thinking of a second union. Her heart was in the grave with her husband; and she had long trained her mind and soul to look forward to a joyful resurrection to join him in the realms of bliss; on that she had anchored her final hopes. Of late years Iris began to view her mother-in-law in a strange light. No doubt that good lady was often a little in her way, but then she was so good and mild and fond, so meek, engaging, and clever and useful, who could find fault with her?—who could not but love her? "Ah," said Iris to herself, "she is wasting her sweetness on the desert air here. I wonder whether I could not turn so much worth into money? Of what good is it besides, as this world goes. There is that Dr. Trensham, that eternal Dr. Trensham, the only man who has made a fortune by the Hygienic humbug, while it has all but destroyed my poor father. Well, the doctor owes me a debt—that debt of my parent's ruin; and I verily believe it was he, and

not Oberon, who bestialised young Cubborn's nose, and to whom we thereby owe many, if not all, our misfortunes. Well, I know he is very fond of my dear mother-in-law, dotingly, foolishly fond. Could I not contrive to make a matrimonial bargain, to bring them together, and leave us all rich and happy; to turn, in fact, the Hygienic Food Company into a profit for the family, as it ought to be. I think I can do this. 'All victory!' Bah! dear Oberon's poetry. Let me have the reality."

Three whole days did Iris spend in persuading Mrs. Spell of the absolute necessity of this union. Her case was strong and clear, and might be summed up in a few words. With Dr. Trensham there was wealth and redemption, without him poverty and ruin. But Iris was too skilful a diplomatist to go about her work in this coarse manner; she knew Oberon's mother better than to assail her heart with the sordid pleas of self-interest; it may be said, too, that she knew the feminine heart better. She accordingly addressed herself to those feelings which Iris believed to be in every woman's nature—a love of a protector and home, a partner of her affections, joys and sorrows. She pointed out to the widow the long and barren sacrifice she had made of her former life, the dreary prospects of the future. Oberon in becoming a husband and a father was no longer—even with the best dispositions and warmest feelings—entirely her son; he had passed away his being and destiny to others; he had to leave everything to cleave to his wife and children. It was the lonely woman's duty to meet the will of

Providence, and to see that when a preferable condition and eligible offer presented itself, she should not continue a solitary entity in the world. Now, there was Dr. Trensham, a warm and persevering admirer of the widow. He was a man of science and ability, had ample means. He was also a very good-looking gentlemanly man, and was much attached to Oberon. Besides, poor fellow, by all accounts he very badly needed a wife to take care of him. He was, she understood, quite the victim of servants. Surely Heaven here pointed the way to a union. "The doctor, I know, has never proposed for you, dear, but how glad would he be to do so, if he had only the slightest ray of encouragement. Suppose we invite him over for Sunday evening. He can pass an agreeable hour or so with us, and perhaps with you, mamma," added Iris, laughing. Mrs. Spell gave a tardy yet somewhat arch consent; for the woman's feelings, as Iris knew, were lurking still in a corner of her heart, and Iris, dreading delays—for which indeed she had little scope—pressed matters to a decision. It was arranged to invite Dr. Trensham to pass the next Sunday evening in the small cottage at Bayswater.

But the great battle was to be fought with Oberon. He was not to be imposed upon by ingenious devices about his mother's wasted life and affections. He knew that what was uppermost in the mind of Iris was to sell his mother to the highest bidder. He did not disapprove of Dr. Trensham, he rather liked him as a friend, and was

grateful to him for his appreciation and attachment ; but his mother—his pure, sainted mother—was not to be bought and sold like a slave in the market. Iris, however, stuck to her point. *She suppressed as much as possible the money view of the matter in her conversation, and still continued to portray the lonely and neglected life his mother was likely to lead in the midst of their distressed circumstances, and with such dreary prospects before them. Oberon thought over all this. He felt that his wife's foreshadowing was only too true. He knew Dr. Trensham to be an estimable man and his own friend ; it was his duty not to reject such a protector for his mother during what might be a long life, and possibly without his presence or aid. In a word, Iris had conquered her husband, and this, perhaps, on one of the most repugnant and difficult subjects which could have been mooted.

And now the next step was to see Dr. Trensham before he came over on the Sunday. This she effected on the Saturday. A very lengthened conversation took place between Iris and the inventor of the Hygienic Food system at the chambers of Mr. Rasper, who was not present at the meeting. Iris was candid with the doctor ; she explained her motives in desiring the union. She did not conceal from him Oberon's difficulties. She put on an air of confidence throughout, and spoke to him in the light of a father, and she made a bargain—a set bargain—that if she obtained the consent of the widow—if, in other words, and in brief, the widow gave her own consent on the Sunday to the mar-

riage, he, Dr. Trensham, was to hand over to her, Iris Spell, a promissory note for 2000*l.* payable at his convenience. The doctor did not want money; he did want to relieve Oberon, for whom he entertained grave feelings of genuine friendship; but he knew not how to do so with any countenance or show of success, there was such an air of independence about both mother and son. Now the question was put to him in a manner which immediately recommended itself to his practical judgment, for, in addition to his desire to relieve the necessities of his friend, he was passionately fond of Martha Spell, and had loved her from the first moment he saw her. He therefore immediately closed with Iris's clever compact. The aid of Mr. Rasper was called in to clinch it on the instant, all proper delicacy being observed on the occasion. The note was even lodged with Rasper, on the written condition that he was to return it, if requested on the Monday to do so by Dr. Trensham.

The Sunday evening came. There was some trepidation and a species of concealed understanding among all present at the family tea-table. But Dr. Trensham and Mrs. Spell having been left half an hour together, matters were arranged to the satisfaction of every one. They had known one another and been intimate for years, which wonderfully helped to bring the business to a speedy conclusion. On Tuesday morning Iris went in a cab to the chambers of Mr. Rasper, and settled affairs with him off-hand. He cashed the note on receiving a moderate discount—it was only for two months.

He paid himself every farthing which Oberon owed him, he gave up the securities, and with these and a small balance in hand, Iris returned to her husband. It was a condition with Dr. Trensham that for the present neither Oberon nor his mother should know the exact particulars of the accepted suitor's liberality and act of friendship.

"There, thank God you have a wife," said Iris, laughing, and laying the securities on the table. "There, put them in your strong box, and that to our account in the London and Westminster bank. And now—not a word, I will answer no questions—remember, 'tis Iris, your wife, who imposes this necessary restriction."

"For the second time in your life, Iris, my love. But when is this mystery to end?"

"When you grow rich, my dear. At present they are 'the wife's secret.'"

Again Oberon Spell was sent free on the world, but this time without a stain on his name, and with a small capital to begin with.

"I want fifty pounds for my father, my dear. I have just received a letter from him, stating that, after many vicissitudes and some wonderful runs of fortune, he is now driven hard, and thirty pounds would be of infinite service 'just at the present crisis.' We will send him fifty, Oberon. He is my dear father, and while I live he shall never want, God bless him. Here, read his letter, it is to us both, and is long and amusing. Is it not singular what he says about that old gentleman, Spell? The name is remarkable. He may be a relation of yours.

He is rich, and I hope, like you, Oberon, good-natured. I shall write to my father not to lose sight of this precious nugget."

The marriage of Mrs. Spell and Dr. Trensham did not take place immediately ; a full twelve months intervened before that event came formally off, and meantime everybody knew it was expected. Perhaps the widow had to discipline her mind gradually to the change, although we could not say that she had not long thought of the comparative loneliness of her lot in life. Should anything occur to her son, she would be left entirely desolate ; and of late, poor fellow, his infinite labour had, over-reaching itself, rendered him incapable of assisting anyone. Dr. Trensham was a good-looking man, if anything a little younger than herself, of the most accurately neat personal habits. He evidently had a regard for her. He was intellectual and clever, too, and he had a splendid fortune. Besides, his attentions to her had always been most delicate ; he never obtruded his liking, and his affection and friendship for Oberon could not be doubted. Many reasons thus had suggested themselves to her own mind before Iris pressed the matter so home upon her feelings and judgment. When the happy day arrived, the fair and accomplished widow was prepared for the change. The ceremony was public and open ; Iris, who was in her glory, took good care of that : and on the whole, Oberon had no occasion to regret the alliance, however he might disapprove of some of its suspected concomitants. Of course he at once set down his release from Rasper to the liberality of the

doctor and the address of his wife, but satisfied in his mind that there could not be any dishonourable or improper bargain, he did not seek to intrude on the secrecy of Iris.

The question soon naturally arose what Oberon was to do for a living. He was now once more quite restored; he could attempt literature and journalism again; he did so to a certain extent, but he found the avenues closed, the places filled up. His powers once lost were believed to be for ever gone, and editors were unwilling to compromise themselves by holding out any definite encouragement.

"I thought it would never last," said Iris, laughing. "Oh, you have ceased to be a poor author—a philosopher, whose profoundest study is to provide a meal for a hungry stomach. Now, thank Heaven, the prospect of the workhouse, or death on a dry crust in a garret, has vanished; we are free for common-sense and profitable exertion at last. I have been a thinking,—thinking, Oberon, dear, you must become a doctor."

"A what! my love?"

"Why, a doctor; Dr. Spell, to be sure. Oh, you would make a splendid physician, such a dear creature to win his way among the ladies. To be serious, though, I have really made up my mind that you should become the pupil of Trensham, walk the hospitals and all that, and set up as a regular practitioner," and Iris broke out into one of her merry fits of laughter.

"But, my dear, you who have such a horror of

study, forget that the life of a medical man of any eminence must be one of perpetual study."

"Bah! nonsense. 'Tis a trade, Oberon; and unless you learn it as a trade, a mere trade, you will never succeed. You must go to work with Trensham. I do not say you need slay your hundreds in experiments, but you will have to try them, and learn perfection often through mistakes."

By this and similar conversations and reasonings, amusing and apocryphal as some of them were, as well as by the stern necessity of mastering some money-making profession, Oberon was at length induced to listen to the arguments and entreaties of his wife, his mother, and all his friends, Dr. Trensham among the rest, and seriously entered on a course of regular study and practice to qualify himself for the higher walks of the medical faculty. Perhaps on the whole he could not have acted more wisely. Any blots which may have rested on his character would disappear among the fast friends he should win around him as a master mind in a profession where genuine worth and really superior ability and skill are sure in time to be appreciated, and to leave their evidence too marked and clear to be obliterated by any amount of calumny. Some of the ordeals the delicate mind of the poet had to go through, were repulsive enough to him, but so they had been to thousands of others; he therefore nobly persevered, and in three years from the time of his entrance on his hospital course, he was a well qualified member of the Faculty. He took up his position once more in Edelstone in the house

which his father-in-law, Dr. Trensham, had so long occupied—a large and imposing one—and there commenced his real career as a physician. The doctor himself had removed to Myrtle Cottage, which, as we know, had been carefully rebuilt; and there, retired from the responsibilities and anxieties of a professional life, he passed his days in the society of a wife whom he fondly loved, and who to the full reciprocated his affection. But as for Oberon Spell, we must not imagine his cares to have ceased when he became a doctor. He had so many rivalries, prejudices, and jealousies to overcome, and still his real enemies to combat, now on the spot and almost face to face before him,—he had to steel his heart to so many acts of ingratitude in his new profession, and to walk in the constant shadow of evil representation; but on he went, making money and making friends, through the fire of competitors, malignants, and ingrates, till at last it might be truly said that he had come safe out of the ordeal, and was the acknowledged chief physician of Edlestone, and indeed of the county.

CHAPTER IV.

SOME OF OUR LEADING CHARACTERS PASS IN REVIEW.



AND now let us turn to the artist, Hugh Graff, and ask what has been his career during the current of the few years we are briefly reviewing? The marriage of Hugh was not happy, nor was it particularly otherwise. There was little real sympathy between him and his wife, and no love. Their children were puny and deformed, and far from joyous and attractive, and were continually in the hands of the doctor. Hugh had become an Academician, and among the whole of that influential body he was regarded as one of the most influential. He was very attentive in the discharge of the various honorary offices assigned him, very quiet and undemonstrative; kept a fine house, and a good table at home, and on the whole was regarded as a great acquisition to the close corporation.

What most annoyed the painter in his upward career, was the occasional presence and obtrusion of his numerous brothers and sisters in several places where he could have much desired their absence. Some of them had settled in life, were of an independent disposition, and jealous and envious of their brother's great fortunes, and instead of elevating, took an actual pride in lowering him whenever an

opportunity occurred to do so. It was in vain that Hugh essayed to raise his family to something of a social position. In no one instance did he succeed ; they would continue mechanics and tradesmen all the days of their life, and he himself forgot that he was only one of a larger degree. This mechanical turn which kept them down, had been the making of him through his whole course as a painter.

And as to his relations with Oberon Spell, Hugh at one time, as we have seen, was very near an awful precipice. He was still intimate with Jonathan Cubborn. His secret object was to be avenged somehow on his former friend and guide. Hugh could not forgive the blows inflicted on him in his studio ; but just as he had matured a new plan of summary revenge with the Mephistopheles he had selected as a companion, Iris, his good angel, appeared : once more Iris Spell was within that studio, and once more she left on the artist's mind a lasting impression. It was a bleak winter's morning, with fog and drizzling rain without, but Iris was dressed for the occasion, and looked as radiant and happy as ever. Hugh Graff turned very pale when he beheld her, and the lady herself was not without her nervous qualms.

" Hugh, I have come to save you. I will not take a seat, for I have not many minutes to stay. But, listen to me ; I say, I have come to save you !"

" To save me, Iris ?"

" Ay, to save you ! you are on the road to ruin ! You tread the earth in the company of perhaps the greatest villain that ever disfigured it."

“ I—who ?”

“ Jonathan Cubborn. I know him. You will believe me, will you not ?”

“ Oh, yes, dear Iris,—yes ; I mean—— I would swear by what you say.”

“ Swear not at all,” said Iris, solemnly. “ What I want of you is to avoid the blasphemer’s company. I know your spite against Oberon : it is unworthy of you, and if carried too far might prove dangerous to the Academician. If you are capable of a great thought, you will ascend to my husband’s height ; he is the only noble being I have ever met with in my career of life, and for this he has more than my heart, he has my judgment and esteem. You owe him a large debt of gratitude, Hugh, and it is degrading in you to forget his former love and protection.”

“ He struck me !” Hugh Graff’s countenance exhibited a start of anger and ferocity of which Iris could not conceive the sleek, quiet man to be capable.

“ You provoked him ; and Oberon is, and always has been, not only a man of honour, but willing and able to vindicate his honour. I am not here to defend him—he can well do that himself—but to protect you, Hugh—you—you, my portrait-painter, the R.A. and P.R.A. to be—my old pet child. You have by infinite pains and slow degrees built up a character—a character which, more than your art, has raised you to fortune and eminence. Now, only let the diabolical plot you are hatching with Cubborn be discovered and brought home to your door,

as I can bring it thoroughly home, and see how soon that character of a life's long labour will vanish, and you become despised and contemptible. No, Hugh, give up your machinations—they are perilous working; eschew the counsel and society of Jonathan Cubborn, and go on, as you have gone on, a careful, plodding, *virtuous* man”—the epithet was applied with Iris's most pointed and effective emphasis—“do not forfeit so much appearance and labour and success to gratify a mean spite. However, if you are resolved to be wicked, I have the will and the power to put you down with disgrace, or any base thing like you; and I will not spare you, of that feel assured.”

“You will not? But what plot—what discovery?”

“Why, *the* plot—the discovery, not to run away with me this time—which would be a sorry day for you—but to be Cubborn's instrument in the vain attempt to destroy Oberon's medical reputation. There—ah! I read you well! I see you have resolved to abandon the evil and cleave to the good, which is also the most profitable. Hugh is himself again. Your hand, brother. Now, whilst I hold it, promise me that you will as much as possible avoid the society of Jonathan Cubborn. Do you promise me?”

“I do, dear Iris; will you allow me to call you so?”

“I have allowed you. Good-bye; my time is up; I have done my duty to my brother and to my husband;” and saying this, she hastened back to

the cab that was waiting for her in the melancholy deserted streets. We once more, therefore, see Hugh Graff in his normal character of an ambitious man, always creeping on and concealing his ambition, bidding fair to fill one day even a higher position than the one he now occupies. For of late Hugh's attendance at Her Majesty's *levées* had been most assiduous. He was one of the most gentle and agreeable of the Academicians on the great day of the annual banquet; he had quite a staff of the superior members of the press as guests and friends, and he ranked among his patrons the prime minister and some of the highest nobility of the United Kingdom.

But what are the Cubborns, the evil genii of our story, doing? What have they done all this time? A vast change has taken place in that happy family. The head of the firm, Mr. Andrew Cubborn himself, "sloped," as the cant term goes. He abandoned the wicked legal concern, alarmed at its increasing danger, and dreading an explosion some day. One fine morning Mrs. Cubborn, Mr. Jonathan Cubborn, and the whole village of Edelstone, were astonished to learn that the eminent solicitor had taken his departure for the Continent in the cheerful company of Miss Diana Flowers, eldest daughter of the learned and magnificent principal of Cramton Hall. The lady was getting on the shady side of life, her legal admirer's offers and settlements, so to call them, however clandestine, were of a very tempting character; he himself was an agreeable kind of man, made truly miserable

and wretched in a diabolical home ; and on the whole, our sober, calculating spinster thought as she could not marry, not having had an offer, she would quietly and secretly accept his formal though somewhat perilous proposal of an elopement, and pass her days with the lawyer on the Continent. She easily surmised that her family would get over the disgrace. She was not plunging into poverty, and there were some very mitigating circumstances in the wilful step she had taken.

Mr. Cubborn having disposed of all his real property, left sufficient in the funds for a liberal allowance to his wife ; and besides giving up the whole of the business and securities to his son, he made investments for him which would yield at least some fifteen hundred a year. Having arranged all this tranquilly and composedly as a lawyer should do, he took his departure with his *inamorata*, and left plots and villanies for ever behind him in Edelstone.

Mrs. Cubborn, as we may suppose, was furious at her husband's desertion. In her coarse way she loved him intensely, and all her life she was insanely jealous of him. She put detectives and special spies at work to discover the hiding-place of the fugitives ; but some of these only laughed at her or deceived her. They were unsuccessful, and attributed their failure to the madness of the pursuit. In time the infuriated wife began to recover her cool reason, and to put forth her own strong powers to supply the loss of the really active and operative member of the firm. She at best had been only

its bold, ever-watchful counsellor. Gilbert Trapper thought his day was come, that he would now reign supreme in the office, and in the affections, so to speak, of Barbara Cubborn. But he was never more mistaken. The tigress had no love from her cub and mate. She could pretend a notice or liking for others, but never went beyond the line of material chastity. Spiritual purity does not belong to such natures. Trapper's usefulness and powers increased, but the great feminine lawyer never reposed in that unprincipled crawler any real confidence, and firmly persisted in not admitting him to any share in the business. He was merely her clerk, or her son's clerk, and a clerk he should remain till she chose to manumit him. As to Jonathan, he, though the ostensible and sole chief of the firm, was in reality her slave, worked out her nefarious conspiracies and other deeds of evil, and had no voice or power beyond her despotic will.

But for Ernestine Wheatley—for the gifted and beautiful—nobly born and nobly allied—Countess Summers. What has been her fate—her career? She has now been some ten years a wife; she has had all the advantages that high birth, high position, ample fortune, a pure morality, and great natural endowments could command. Her father was still, and had been for some time, a Cabinet minister, and was deservedly popular; and her mother was living, and as much attached to her daughter as ever. For all this the Countess Summers was not happy—it may be said, indeed, that her lot was

wretched. She had married a man who thought in his rude fashion he loved her, but who loved vice more. The Earl, sad to say, continued his career as a libertine. He was addicted to gambling, not only on the turf and in other sporting circles, but more deeply and seriously at cards and the roulette table. There were no children issue of the marriage, but a little illegitimate would from time to time present himself and claim the paternity of the licentious Earl.

This was not a union calculated to make Ernestine happy. In the seclusion of her chamber, in her solitary walks, she envied the lot of her who was partner in the life struggles of the brave and great man who still held a place in the recesses of her own heart. For banish the image of Oberon Spell from her breast she could not and would not. It was her solace and happiness. She had long ceased to think of him but as a noble child of nature battling against adversity and the stratagems and assaults of the unscrupulous and wicked. She had forsaken, as much as her station would allow her, the pomps and vanities of the world, and had devoted herself to deeds of kindness, benevolence and charity. "O that she could relieve and comfort Oberon among the rest!" This was her day-dream—the one earnest thought of her life. She had not grown less beautiful, for hers was a cast of form that retains its graceful outline and features to the last, but her countenance had become more severely Greek and classical, and it was now a tinge paler—paler than its statuesque

beauty ever had been before. She always demeaned herself with strict propriety, and even with consideration and kindness and a certain wife-like obedience to her husband. True, he had never openly ill-treated her or neglected her. His libertinism was conducted in private, and was a part of his loose irregular life and system; it might die out in time, but its branded and ruinous consequences must remain. Meantime he was plunging every year more deeply into debt, and among his largest creditors was Jonathan Cubborn.

CHAPTER V.

THE CUBBORNS, MOTHER AND SON.



It was a cold day in the month of January. The frost had grown used to the ground, and had taken up its hard, dry position among the ruts of the road, previously deluged by a thaw ; so firm now, and unyielding and ringing to the wheels, that people began to look upon such a thing as mud, or slush, or anything but ice-baked roads, as impossible. Not a spot of moisture was to be seen anywhere but within doors, in the tea-kettle or the boiling pot on the fire. Everything was frozen, everything was cold and black, and yet not altogether unpleasant. The water had become perfectly delightful, the slides here and there on the highways quite a source of mirth and jollity. It was a new world, an almost universal holiday. Everybody took to the ponds, or the lakes, or the streams, or the rivers, whatever was cased up and bound by the thrice-ribbed frost. It was astonishing what hilarity was everywhere. Not the brightest day in summer, not the cheeriest May morn ever seen, not the hours of the golden harvest, were a hundredth part so jovial as this dreariest day of winter ; dreary, for the air was sharp and biting, without a ray of sunlight to soften or gladden it ; the winds were keen and piercing,

passing over the face like so many knives, and between the clothes and the skin, and on the stomach, till one began to feel that death himself was around and about, and could only be exorcised by a draught of brandy, a warm cup of tea, or a brisk sea-coal fire. The water had stood still and would not move, it was frozen above and stagnant beneath, and for inches—and sometimes for feet—below was a mass of solid glass, up through which the dismal fishes peered, asking themselves in their nooks and crannies whether spring-time would ever come again. The earth and all upon it—trees, plants, and houses—looked like the city of the dead, the Necropolis of all vegetable and animal being, while the mocking spirits of the ice were revelling around, and rejoicing that their cold, crisp season of the skate and the sledge, and the brilliant snow and the thudding snowballs, was come back again. Everything was very pleasant out of doors to those resolved to make it so, save the naked backs and hungry stomachs of the poor; but the mirth was so broad and general that even these had forgotten their bareness and emptiness, and the very frozen out gardeners, with their “We have no work to do,” had a sly sub-smile or open laugh on their lips as they marched along the parched and barren roads; so adaptable is cosmopolitan man to every change of condition and clime.

It was on a day like this, with real hilarity out of doors, that Mrs. Cubborn and her son were cooped up in their room, or rather in the lady’s room; although of late she had given Jonathan a

permanent seat in that secret recess of wickedness. They were both glum and prepared for a quarrel; for the pair now seldom met on business without commencing with a warm dispute of some kind. Jonathan took up the poker and began to stir the fire violently.

"What are you doing that for? Do you want to set the house on fire?"

"A good job too, if it were burnt and all that's in it!"

"Perhaps you like fires, Natty, and fire-balls, and blazing away at papers. I have too much to lose by any such tricks. The securities here are not poems or MSS., they are of some value. There, put down the poker, and do attend to business."

"Well, what have you to say now?"

"You know my principle, Natty, never to do anything without a substantial motive, and to push nothing too far."

"What are you driving at?"

"Why, I would leave Spell alone now, and have no more to do with him for the present. We have other matters to attend to."

"I tell you"—and here Jonathan Cubborn swore a terrible oath—"as long as I live, and wear this deformed countenance, he shall suffer and she shall suffer. We only exist as enemies, and I the burning devil to torture him and her. Leave Oberon Spell and his wife to me. He has not become a doctor for nothing. I tell you his life shall be a hell—a hell—while I draw breath. That is my affair. Now, mother, what is your other business?"

"Have you those bills?"

"The bills upon Summers, you mean?"

"Yes; have you them?"

"Well, here they are, all ready. I wonder what you would do without me?"

"You are useful."

"Is that all? Useful! What do you mean? Am I not the very heart and strength of the business? And if I were to peach or give in, where would be all your fine schemes?"

"Peach, whelp? What a word from your lips! This is not your own. I know what you have been babbling with that low wretch, Elizabeth."

"Not half so low as your favourite Trapper."

"Peace, puppy! When you talk about treason, remember you are in my power. Peace, I say, perjurer and forger!"

"Forger!—and who set me on and taught me to practise all kinds of writing when a child, and who gives me the cue now? And, I say again, if I were to peach—pray, mother, put down the ruler, do be quiet—but if I were to peach, I defy you, or Scriven, or Spell, or Iris, or the devil himself to prove that I am a forger! Who saw me? Not you, I am sure; not the Swivels, or Schnapps, or Wolfstein, or any of them, and certainly not Gilly Trapper. So have done about forgers and forging. It can never be brought home to my door."

"And to whom are you indebted for the separate system, braggart? Was it not I who devised it? I, who know the law well, better than three-fourths of your Q.C.'s. I invented the plan of doing every-

thing as if it was genuine and sound, quite in the right course. That is our safeguard. You and they may peach, as you call it, as much as you like, but I defy you to make any proof of guilt reach me. Here, let me have those bills. Very well; now for the two bonds. Ah! perfectly executed; and the mortgage. Good! Just open that box, and let me compare them with the genuine ones."

"You are growing particular, ma'am. What, cannot you trust to me? You know I am an old hand now."

"Well, there can be no harm in making assurance doubly sure. That's it. His signature to the turn of a hair stroke. I say, Natty, I often think how little stands between a man and the possession of a fortune."

"Yes, if he is the right man, and makes a study of it, like me. I think I shall be master of that fine Staffordshire estate yet, eh, mother?"

"Eh! why, yes, to be sure, and the Shropshire estate too. We must beggar him. I have a spite against him, and an eternal hatred of his wife."

"And so have I, mother. I will make her eat humble pie yet, the haughty impudence. I think we shall look well driving a tandem through the grounds of that famous old Staffordshire property. Ah! how I long for that day to come."

"Wait, boy, wait. He must fall into hopeless difficulties. There must be time given for himself to forget all that he is now doing. A few years hence, and such a slave to the pleasures of the hour will be quite oblivious of how or where all the

money came from. Only give him tether, and the creature will eat through the whole, or believe he has done so, which is our object."

"But the hard cash is going out of our hands all this time. When will those advances come?"

"Never, I hope, while we can double and treble the bills, and the bonds, and the mortgages—never, never, till Earl Summers is ruined!"

"And who would ever believe that swindling like this would occur in a respectable lawyer's office?"

"Respectable—bah! Have we not the opportunity? Cannot the thing be done? Do we not do it? Only give others—the best of them—the same nous, the same occasion—I have made mine—and you see how soon they would do the business. I tell you what, Natty, my boy, the world is full of rogues, only give them the power; and, believe me, the greatest rogues of all are enrolled attorneys."

"Or unenrolled ones, for that matter."

"Yes; neither of us belie our calling."

"You remind me of what father used to say, pointing at you."

"Oh! the villain, the villain! Do not, I beseech you, Jonathan, raise my anger in that direction. Boy, have done! You drive me mad!"

"And you drove my father away."

"Hold your tongue, sir; hold your tongue. Remember your place, what you are, and who I am."

"Oh, I know we are two unchanged thieves."

"Don't be so coarse. I begin sometimes myself to think we are very bad people, and I often fear that all our crooked ways may have a bad end."

"Do shut up, old woman: don't maudle. It does not suit in a lawyer's office. By-the-bye, how does Trapper get on with his newspaper? A useful thing that, isn't it?"

"And who discovered that too? Was it not I who planned the ruin of the proprietor, and made him, under us, its master?"

"It was a capital hit, that. He got it—type, machine, and all—for almost nothing, a fraction of the interest we charged old Gully."

"And now, instead of begging the insertion of a paragraph, and paying sometimes heavily, we can command whole pages of scandal, just according to our own will and prompting. I tell you, Jonathan, if I died to-morrow, I could not but feel that I, once a poor girl and a poor woman's child, have lived to possess great power and dominion. I often think what an empress I would make!"

"We don't know what might be yet, mother, if the Radicals only get the lead. I begin to think they are right, mother."

"I never thought otherwise. It was only that electioneering business of Sir Roger Wheatley's that made me pretend to be of the other school. As you say, we do not know what may turn up. So look out, boy; keep your counsel, be industrious, and prosper. Now leave me."

Cases which occasionally crop up in our criminal courts show how difficult it is to bring a clever forgery home to the guilty party. But when the principal actor is a skilful attorney, an artist in imitative chirography, and he happens to be asso-

ciated with men of wealth and mercantile reputation at home and abroad, complete discovery is almost hopeless, unless there be treachery among the conspirators. But even this loophole for betrayal Mrs. Cubborn had shut up, and scarcely left a slit or cranny for detection.

The power lodged in attorneys' hands is very great. They are frequently the only confidential advisers of families. With them are lodged secrets whose divulgence would darken or ruin many a home. If the solicitor should betray his trust, or wickedly turn it to his own account and abuse it, the consequences to the clients might be terrible. That the great mass of the profession in this country are men of probity, wisdom, and honour, is best proved by the correctness, authority, and stability of our legal deeds and settlements. But it cannot be denied that a strong case for suspicion is made out against attorneys of using undue means to push forward their own fortunes, when we find them, as is too often the case, becoming the possessors of the very estates of their clients, or through their fall acquiring large property.

We have only to look at the late American war or to Congress to see how bold and prominent a part and attitude these legal functionaries can assume in a country uncontrolled by constitutional barriers to licence and ambition. Even Barbara Cubborn's dream of becoming a queen or an empress one day must not be regarded as altogether incoherent, visionary, or extravagant; a United States president's wife is equal to an empress in

the exercise of feminine power, and something more if she chooses to use it. In a democracy, the female despot of Edelstone might aspire to a dictatorial position. Her plans were deeply laid. She steadily aimed at obtaining vast estates for herself and son, and once possessed of these, with her unscrupulous art and ability, she placed no limit to her ambition. She had grown more refined, or rather less coarse, in her career of guilt. The absence of her husband, of whom she was painfully and actively jealous, quite unconscious to herself, had a calming effect on her perturbed imagination; and the greater responsibility and widening of her vast operations and hopes promoted a certain sedateness and dignity in her conduct which some might mistake, and which was mistaken, for consideration and justice. In fact, Barbara Cubborn was becoming almost insensibly a diplomatist and statesman even in her nefarious conspiracies, for with her they were all to end in feminine empire.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNTESS SUMMERS FALLS SICK—THE BROOCH TURNS UP ONCE MORE.



THE village of Edelstone had gone on increasing, and was grown almost into a town in magnitude by the constant rise of new houses in every direction. There was a demand for them, a brisk demand. The railway was a perpetual feeder. The old hamlet had nearly passed away, or any importance it had possessed was fast disappearing amidst the nice, trim, and commodious shops and the elegant villas which were springing up wherever a bit of spare ground was to be found. The building went chiefly on in the track of the Priory, and thus made the property of Sir Roger Wheatley far more valuable.

Oberon Spell, or Doctor Spell, as he was now called, found ample practice in the neighbourhood. His whole system and treatment were far superior to the common routine followed by the provincial faculty. Even his competitors and rivals—Dr. Atomcraft among the rest—admitted his claims to be considered their intellectual chief. The infinitesimal doctor—as Dr. Atomcraft was called—while he did not altogether abandon or condemn the allopathic method, was still a great stickler for homœopathy, and regulated much of his practice

by the hygienic laws at the bottom of all the success it had obtained. Oberon was not a mere apothecary, he did not sell physic—much against his wife's counsel at first ; he merely gave prescriptions and attended his patients as a physician. At the outset he had no carriage of his own to convey him, and the distances were often far to traverse, but he went them cheerfully on foot, and derived health, if not always honour or pleasure, from his pedestrian journeys. He was firmly resolved not to incur the slightest debt ever again, if at all avoidable. By much persuasion and some remonstrance he at length brought his wife to adopt the same system. He found that a want of truth and a facility at deception were the principal sources of debt ; that in fact few tradespeople would give trust if they could plainly see the state of their customers' affairs. We speak not here about persons of ample means, but of the class that become real debtors. Oberon Spell had the greatest possible difficulty in bringing his wife to speak and act the pure unvarnished truth. Strange to say, her whole life and career had been one of wholesale fiction, sometimes a harsher term would better express her practice. There must be exaggeration, deception, or false representation and show of one kind or other, or Iris could not live ; she would be dull and miserable, and account herself very stupid and commonplace indeed. Everybody was a lie of some kind, and one of the uses of discernment and prudence was to see through the wiles and concealments of people. Oberon was a long time before he could convince his wife that

there could be no genuine morality, and certainly no real religion, where implicit truth did not prevail. He made her feel that she was for ever in the presence of a God who is the sole original controller of our actions; that he is sincere verity, and must abhor the practised liar. If the husband did not succeed in producing angelic simplicity and truthfulness in his wife, he at least persuaded her to abandon the grosser routine fabrications, of which debt is one of the most deplorable causes and results. Oberon Spell was walking the earth firmly on a good road and foundation. He had only to persevere, and he would realize a handsome competency if not a fortune, by his professional exertions. In time too the wished-for and necessary conveyance came. At first it was only a very quiet chaise, then a cabriolet, then a brougham, and lastly an elegant and roomy carriage drawn by a pair of model horses. When Iris saw this, and was enabled to go out driving and visiting in fashionable style among her friends and neighbours, and felt that there was no encumbrance in the background, her heart expanded, and she then understood the full force of her husband's former self-denial and wisdom.

But where was the poet and man of letters all this time? Lost absolutely in the battle of life. The Muses demand leisure—a life of contemplation and observation, filled up at happy intervals by *con amore* labour. The luxury, the unspeakable felicity of working on the subject congenial to the natural bent of the mind and disposition were denied him. He had to put down his genuine feelings, to forego

his proper vocation, and to make a habit and a pleasure of that calling which enabled him to live with respectability and honour, with comfort and happiness. In fact, he had to shape himself to the world wherein he found himself, and not think that society was made for him. This is the grand and ultimate masculine education. He knew that this was to sacrifice his genius, to abandon his sentimentality, to close or render useless many stores of his knowledge. The necessity was a hard one, but it is one placed on thousands upon thousands all over the globe. Our very industrial exhibitions show that many successful, honest, and thriving mechanics have long pursued trades not the choice of their fancy or the bent of their nature, but the compulsory task assigned them by their position and circumstances. Oberon Spell was not as happy perhaps as he would be were he at work as a poet or author, enabled to spend and accumulate riches by his writings; but he was in the place allotted to him by Providence, and he felt in a great measure contented. "After all," he would say, "the principal destiny of man here is to provide for a family, and to this great law of nature everything must bend."

He was in the way of doing constant good. He could benefit the poor by his gratuitous advice; he could assist in directing public attention continually to the much neglected laws of health; he could diminish pain, suffering, and disease, and save many lives precious to their family and to society. If he could not, like the poet, be the inspiration of in-

tellectual life, he could be its material restorer and prolonger—thus far its creator. All the diseased or feeble among the lower animals died out from weakness or distemper, as immediate and natural results of their defects; he and others doing or helping in the same office of reparation or assuagement expelled the malady, restored the sinking frame to vigour and action, and added years, under Providence, to the duration of human life; a great faculty this in the mundane polity. He got in time to like his profession, and looked back on his literary toils as dreams and delusions founded on the system, encouragement, and actual wants of another age, but extraneous and superfluous in ours, where the ready, the practical, and the useful are all that is sought or desiderated to fill up the necessary voids in a hard, matter-of-fact world.

Among the very severe cases which exercised Oberon Spell's vigilance, zeal, attention, and skill from time to time in Edelstone, was a sudden irruption of typhus fever. The disease had been, beyond doubt, introduced into the village during the harvest; for the first victim was a poor Irish girl, the daughter of a labourer who had wandered thus far from his home with his family, in search of that employment denied him by an over-stocked market or an agriculture too scant for a peasant population. Whatever was its origin it found a lair in the ill-drained village, and spread rapidly, not alone among the humble, the dirty, and careless, but among the wealthy and methodical, in whose houses cleanliness was a system. It may be that persons of a refined

organization and delicate constitution, accustomed only to breathe a pure air and to live on the choicest diet, would be more susceptible to atmospheric or contagious influences, than creatures with whom an unwholesome condition of every kind has become a habit and a second nature. But certain it is that malignant fevers often attack those whose lives and circumstances would almost be taken by some as a guarantee against this description of plague.

Oberon almost rejoiced to be enabled now to show the heroism that was within him. Day and night was he among those stricken down; beside the very poor as constantly as with the well-to-do shopkeeper or the rich man prostrated. He ran great risk; but so does the soldier and sailor in battle; and who thinks of praising the defender of his country for merely performing his duty? The physician was glad to evince his calm courage amid scenes from which his colleagues of the faculty shrank, and to be benevolent and consoling where the rector of the parish was not to be found, and where his two curates were appalled and slunk away themselves as if plague-stricken. Oberon and an aged Catholic priest were the only two real heroes in all that wilderness of disaster—all but one. Around, in every house affected by the contagion, the Countess Summers was to be seen, rendering moneyed aid and personal assistance where required, but affording throughout, without distinction of creed, religious consolation and that moral presence and succour of so much advantage in stimulating others to the exercise of compassion and humanity.

Of course she would often meet Oberon Spell in her walks of charity, but she was now purified from the dross of mere earthly affection, and she regarded him as he viewed her, in the light of an angelic friend, sent by heaven to comfort his afflicted creatures. They enjoyed many a calm, Christian conversation, without a taint of cant or false feeling to soil their work of goodness, mercy, and kindness. Their mutual task was often one of great personal danger, but neither thought of self, and they both frequently succeeded in raising a sick patient from a couch of death, or where this was not possible, they enjoyed the unspeakable felicity of smoothing the bed of agony, and of purifying with spiritual balm and all the aids of physical science the pestilential atmosphere which had sapped and destroyed the life principle in many a strong frame and many a fair and beautiful promise; the father and the child went alike, and the mother often lay in the same grave on the selfsame day as her daughter and husband. We would not say there was moral danger to Oberon in all this combined work of charity, but there was peril to the peace of his home. Iris was not a jealous woman. She may be said to have been too strong-minded for that; but she had her wits active about her. She, of all persons out of Sir Roger Wheatley's own family, knew, or suspected with the intuition of feminine knowledge, Ernestine's former hopeless passion for the youth Oberon; and although she placed great faith in her husband, she deemed he would be far safer in many ways apart from the

double danger now menacing him—the sentimental malady as well as the more real and awful plague of the fever. But it was in vain that she endeavoured to allure the physician from his duty, although she used every art and persuasive of which her genius, manners, and attractions were capable. Oberon was the soldier, sworn to defend his post, and from that firm sense and resolve he could not be moved, even by her voice who had ever swayed him ; and Iris, with an increased admiration of his nobility of character, at length ceased to seduce him by offering her daily list of prudential domestic suggestions.

Time and skill and sanitary precautions had begun to mitigate the virulence of the disease. In a month from its commencement it was nearly extirpated, and every man congratulated his neighbour on the departure of that frightful pestilence. It was just at this moment of mutual felicitation that the lurking infection dropped its virus into the blood of the exalted heroine, who had heretofore walked through and around and about its most mortal and feculent hiding-places untouched and unscathed. The Lady Summers—she, the love and pride of all—she, the spirit of that charity which goeth about doing good—she, the comforter and restorer of so many weary and afflicted mortals, was herself now stricken down, and by the worst form of the contagion.

Oberon Spell was not only the great physician of the place, he was its hero ; he and Ernestine alone were fearless while the plague was raging

around; he had walked hand in hand, it might be said, with her in administering aid and consolation—who then should a doting father, and a fond and distracted mother, and a husband not without affection, call in to watch the patient constantly? Who but Oberon Spell, whom Sir Ulysses Kennard himself recommended as one among the first physicians of the age, and an honour to the profession of which he himself was in this country the chief? Oberon was summoned as he had expected, and hastily entering his carriage, drove up to the Priory, not without a feeling of the deepest grief and some secret palpitations unknown to his bosom outside the circle of his own family.

Of late, and indeed since his final return to Edelstone, he had been on friendly terms with Sir Roger Wheatley. They often met, and always with the greatest cordiality on the part of the minister. 'Tis true Lady Wheatley still held herself aloof from the man who had rejected her daughter's hand, and to whom she attributed, however unjustly, the disasters of the unfortunate marriage with her relation, Earl Summers. This nobleman himself, too, never encouraged—was it from an instinctive dislike?—the polite advances of the justly celebrated physician, even on occasions when it was the part of the lord lieutenant of the county to show courtesy and attention to all who approached him. But on the present emergency all distinctions or unpleasant memories were forgotten, and Dr. Spell was received by the whole family assembled in the most cordial manner, and with that respect with which the only

probable human saviour of the beloved sufferer would naturally be regarded.

He examined his patient most carefully; she opened her eyes with something of a heavenly gleam, and faintly smiled as she heard his voice: but she soon closed them again and said nothing. Even in her hour of agony she was internally thinking. Oberon's directions were most precise, and he saw that the principal of them were carried out under his own immediate superintendence. He knew what was required was the extirpation of a poison from the system, and for this he not only required that the most approved remedies should be applied, but that a free and constant ingress of fresh and pure air should be supplied as indispensable, in order among other benefits it would confer, to strengthen the patient to go through the paroxysm of the disease. Sir Ulysses Kennard drove down occasionally, always entering on a most careful diagnosis and consultation when he came. He pronounced the treatment excellent, and after a few visits joined Oberon in giving a favourable opinion of the patient.

By very slow degrees, by the most anxious watchings and care of fond parents, and the attention and skill of her devoted physician, Ernestine began to recover. As she did so, and experienced how much she owed to him as well as to them, she could not but feel something more than gratitude. It was not her old love returned—for in truth, that had never been extinguished in the recesses of her heart—but it was a manifestation of it as resigned

as it was melancholy and holy. She regarded Oberon as a superior being raised supremely by his nature above the mortals of every class around her. She could not help contrasting him with the unworthy creature she had to call her husband, who it required no great penetration in a wife to discern would not be seriously grieved if that dire disease had taken a fatal turn.

We will not say that Oberon Spell was proof against that silent and dignified grief which he saw was wasting a patient whom he had undergone such heroic labours and pains to restore. Every one now looked for her perfect convalescence. But this did not come. And with more than a physician's skill, the doctor felt the cause. Even Sir Ulysses Kennard and Ernestine's parents attributed her very slow recovery to the exhaustive force of the disease. But Oberon knew better. And he blamed himself—he who should be her restorer—for being her secret destroyer. His feeling was more than pity—it was one of compassion and remorse. He experienced a hurly-burly and confusion within. His condition indeed was most critical, and the keen eyes of his wife were the first to perceive it.

“Oberon, my dear,” said she one day, noticing him buried in deep and unusual thought—unusual of late in the little of his society she could command, “you know I seldom interfere with your management of your patients, but it appears to me that the poor countess must want a change of air; surely she is strong enough now to go on a gentle tour for the perfect restoration of her health. I

fear, my dear, your reputation will suffer if you retain her as your patient too long. People will naturally say—I mean ill-natured people—that your own interests and not those of your patient, most influence you. We all know how false this is; but really, my dear, in this case I think there is some ground for the scandal. I myself feel surprised why you keep her lingering up there at the Priory.”

“The countess is still very feeble, Iris. Both Sir Ulysses Kennard and I are of opinion that it would be unadvisable for her to leave the Priory yet.”

“Oh! I know better than either of you. I tell you what, Oberon, the poor countess has a disease of the heart. Ah! you turn pale. Why, surely you are not affected too? In sober seriousness and for that duty you owe your patient’s character, and let me add, for the duty you owe me too, Oberon—you know I understand you far better than you understand yourself—I then entreat you by all you should hold dear and sacred—by your duty, by your fame, by your love, by a lady’s reputation now jeopardized—to let the poor grief-worn countess quit the Priory; and trust me, her perfect cure will in due course of time be completed, her pure name and your professional honour preserved and vindicated.”

Iris said this in her most impressive manner; she had still a touch of Hilary Dove left in her, and could make a capital speech on an occasion. She spoke now from her heart, and she evidently produced an effect on her husband.

“ Well, Iris, let us drop this subject now, it is rather misplaced ; but I will think about it.” And Oberon did ponder that gracious and holy warning of his wife’s well. He who had been almost careless in freeing himself from false charges, was now over-sensitive lest the fair fame of a noble lady should suffer, or any unworthy imputation rest on his own character, for abusing his profession to selfish pecuniary purposes. Perhaps Oberon felt that while clear of any sordid motive, he could not so easily be acquitted of retaining his beautiful patient under his own care rather beyond the time his presence or advice could prove of real benefit to her, and he might have added, to himself, consulting his own innermost feelings at that peculiar crisis in his life.

However, it came about that in one week from the date of the brief conjugal exhortation reported, the Countess Summers, still an invalid, was, by the advice of Sir Ulysses Kennard and Dr. Spell, once more *en route* for that delightful continental tour which had before proved so beneficial to her under similar circumstances, her mother this time also being her protector and companion. As for Lord Summers, he was too deeply engaged in affairs of the English turf to afford any time to dally with his wife in France or Italy, or whithersoever their wandering pursuit of Ernestine’s health should lead mother and daughter.

Before Oberon had bade adieu to the Countess Summers, which he did without betraying the slightest unworthy emotion, for he had nobly con-

quered an incipient and dangerous passion, Sir Roger Wheatley called him into his library, and expressing his most fervent thanks, he presented him with a cheque for 1000*l.*, insisting on his accepting it as a just tribute to his masterly professional skill, and the care and attention he had devoted to his daughter. The physician responded to the grateful father's wish, and did accept this munificent fee, which was in addition to those he had daily received. Such gifts were not unusual in the profession, and Oberon thought that as they are sometimes amply merited, he could not by a fastidious and unwarrantable refusal, discountenance them or do anything to render them exceptional.

"And now," said the baronet, "one word with you, my dear friend, for you will, I trust, allow me to call you so. I need scarcely assure you that I have never for a moment believed the false charges formerly raised against you, but I refer to this now to inform you in confidence that the authorities at the Home-office have long since given instructions that your enemies—for you have some—should be placed under surveillance. Their conduct is suspected, but as yet nothing tangible against them has been discovered. However, this necessary work of observation will be persisted in. Let me further add, Spell, that when your sons are old enough, should I then be in office, I will have great pleasure in placing one or two of them I hope to your own and their satisfaction. A position in the public service will not, you know," said Sir Roger, smiling, "destroy their independence."

Oberon thanked the friendly minister from his heart, and returned home to tell his wife a part of his triumphs, concealing all that related to the Cubborn conspiracy.

It would be useless denying that Ernestine was deeply, and even dangerously, affected by her departure from Edelstone. That spot contained all next to her parents she really prized on earth. Her love for Oberon Spell was an instinctive, uncontrollable passion, continually nurtured and fostered by esteem. She could not overcome it so long as he remained the noble being she had at first found him. She owed him her life now by the testimony of all, and ineffaceable gratitude was added to her other motives for regard and appreciation.

"Ah!" said she, timidly and faintly, gazing at him with her sweetest smile, it might be for the last time, "ah! Dr. Spell, who will take my place with our poor people now? I fear I must leave it all to you. But my prayers will ever be with you; only do not venture too much; take care of yourself. Good-bye; accept my thanks and this small token for your wife. I regret it has given her some trouble, but let her wear it now as her own for my sake. A letter to her accompanies it. Good-bye, once more; God bless you for ever."

There was an unspeakable solemnity about this parting, and the gift to Iris of the brooch was full of recondite meaning. Why should that bauble still continue to hang around Oberon's fortunes?

CHAPTER VII.

THE CUBBORNS AGAIN—MOTHER AND SON.



It was well that the highest authority in Scotland-yard had been directed to turn the attention of its secret police to the dark conspiracy which Sir Roger Wheatley felt assured was directed against Oberon Spell. Mrs. Cubborn, who herself had one influential agent at head-quarters on whose information she could rely, was put upon her guard against attempting any further evil practices against the doctor. And as she well knew her son was hatching a diabolical plot to bring him within the jaws of the criminal law, dreading the consequences, she summoned that demon of mischief to her side in her small room, and thus addressed him—

“You know, Natty, my dear, that our plan has been all along to defy, if not detection—for that might be impossible to achieve—but at least conviction; to render this altogether unattainable. Each of us has his own work to do, and as none of us have any evidence of what may be criminal in the acts of another, no proof of actual guilt traced home to any one of us can be produced. This has often made our operations involved and intricate, and caused them to be spread over a lengthened space; but they have always been sure. The gains

too have been fairly and equally divided, so that there can be no dissatisfaction. Now this is a peculiar business, and it will not bear speculation of any kind. We must each move with quiet and regular caution within the limits we originally assigned ourselves. He who launches out is a traitor to the party, and may be the ruin of the firm."

"I know all this. Do you think you are speaking to a fool or my father? who, by-the-by, I must tell you, is described by those who have seen him as gloriously happy in his new alliance. But do, mother, give over your grumbling. What can you be driving at?"

"Well, this, Natty; but you need not have reminded me of that scoundrel. However, attend to me. I tell you, Oberon Spell is too great a man for you now to assail. He is no longer a poor poet or author; he has grown beyond you and me; he is the most popular man in Edelstone; and a breath against him would be resented."

"Bah! old woman! he has enemies. All the doctors, however they may shake hands with him and pretend to admire him, are his foes; as for Atomcraft, I know he hates him."

"Well, this has nothing to do with our business at present. What I am coming to is, that you are about to do a bit of devilry on your own account, and have of all others confided in a woman as your chief instrument."

"How do you know this?"

"How do I know everything? Why, by my

instinct, as I have often told you. But this thing must drop. You must not take it an inch further."

"So help me, fiends, I will press it to completion—work it to an end—or I am not the ape-nosed Jonathan Cubborn now standing before you."

"Whether ape-nosed or fox-nosed, you must drop it, I tell you. My boy, do you hear me? It is blown upon. Your instrument has blabbed!"

"That's impossible, for she had nothing to blab! I only told her I should want her this week for a peculiar business."

"And gave her a piece of money—a sovereign, was it not?"

"Well, something like it, the fagot! Has she been to you complaining?"

"Oh dear no! She has been where she would be sure to meet encouragement—to her master, I tell you."

"To Spell and his wife?"

"No; to Sir Peter Spry himself!"

"Oh, she has, has she! She will pay for this."

"Dare to touch her and your life is not your own. You must not so much as allude to what I have told you in the remotest manner. Now, go to her again, and speak of that poor man who has been down with the fever—name some one—and tell her to give him the sovereign. You will thus pay her off—make her your debtor—do you see. The county court then if you like. All things regular. A bit of exposure might do her good. To show her up, as holding back the alms you had

entrusted her with in secret. Ay, boy, that would be rare sport. But although this course is open to you, I advise you to remain quiet. You may tell her she deserves punishment, exposure, and all that, but at present do not bring yourself into overt controversy with her. She has friends, you may well imagine, and so has Oberon Spell; so hush-up and be warned. We must bide our time."

The adroit and deep counsel of his mother was too valuable to be lost on a man of Jonathan Cubborn's shrewdness and penetration. He thanked his wise and wary parent, and left her to her own ruminations, while he sought the humble instrument of his hate. The reflections of Mrs. Cubborn were of rather a grave character. She felt she was growing old—age was upon her. She had read Oberon Spell's words, and she remembered them:—

"Age is condemned to misery; youth may hope,
But age is past redemption."

She felt her son's habitual appellation — "old woman;" she felt her own loneliness; she regretted her husband was not present; if only to scold and worry him, that would be a pleasure. But he was now beyond her reach, and, to her bitter mortification, the father of another rising family, and by all accounts very happy. Trapper was but a poor substitute for the man of legal knowledge and ability; and as to Jonathan, her son, he was clever or assiduous at nothing but feats of the lowest villany and knavery. These were not always uppermost in the business, and she had to look to her

chief clerk for the active external management of very important affairs. But she had her solaces. Her great consolation was the almost fabulous increase of her wealth. The firm of conspirators did a thriving and perfectly safe business. The profits from this source were large, and not likely, with proper caution, to fail. Her grand triumph, however, was over Earl Summers. She had him hopelessly in bondage, by many a correct and legitimate deed, and by others obtained in her own peculiar manner. She hoped not to die till she saw her son master of the two noble estates—the Summers' property in Staffordshire and Shropshire. Everything was ripening for this consummation, and she had gladly expended thousands to realize so grand a project. Her life, 'tis true, was one of caution and fear: she often trembled at the slightest alarm, and she slept with restlessness, and frightful dreams to weary and exhaust her. But she had a constitution of iron, and she was thoroughly unscrupulous and without conscience; evil had become her good, so that she enjoyed existence in her own Mephistophelian way, sneering at what she considered to be the blindness and folly of others. She had reasoned herself into the practical atheism so prevalent in the world. The time was coming when her mettle would be tried, when her religious barrenness would be rudely tested; for even-handed justice commends the ingredients of the poisoned chalice to our own lips, and the bloody instructions return to plague the inventor.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CUBBORNS AND EARL SUMMERS.

ONATHAN CUBBORN was seated in his own room, the principal one of the establishment, and the one which his father and, we may add, his forefathers had occupied before him. Around him were deed boxes and pigeon-holes filled with red-taped papers. The apartment was a spacious one, and a handsome picture, painted by Hugh Graff, stood over the mantelshef. Here and there too were some superior articles of *vertu*—a valuable ancient clock, a modern one of the most expensive description, which also was a beautiful work of art, some costly China jars, and a curiously inlaid cabinet. The desk or writing table before which he was placed, was in itself a rare piece of furniture, and the chairs of the room—all with arms—were elaborate in their workmanship and carving, and stately enough to serve each for a throne. Mrs. Cubborn was, in this instance, though placed opposite her son, not in the seat of honour. That was occupied by the head of the firm, if so he may be called, his mother only acting for the occasion as a kind of chief clerk, her nominal position in the establishment. At one end of the table Earl Summers was seated, and at the other Gilbert Trapper. The young nobleman, now about

thirty-five years of age, looked in reality much older. He was dressed with fastidious neatness, and was still handsome, but he had grown too round and full, and had lost that appearance of grace and elasticity which had before rendered him so attractive. His face too bore the lines of habitual dissipation, and there was in his language and manner such a total air of devil-may-careism and recklessness, that the only wonder was he could be brought to do any kind of business. Jonathan Cubborn had, however, become his principal lawyer, and it was necessary that his attention should be called to the administration of his estates and other matters occasionally. But the subject which for the most part led him to Cubborn's was money—to borrow money, to arrange matters of interest, the renewal of bills, the execution of bonds and mortgages, to prevent foreclosures, and attend to the general business of a borrower, which is only to submit to extortion and be thankful; this was almost the sole cause which called the nobleman to the office of his chief legal adviser.

“My lord,” began Jonathan Cubborn, resuming a conversation which had been interrupted by the entry of a clerk with some written intimation, “my lord. I really fear you are overrunning the constable. Ten thousand pounds at one pull is too much for us at the present moment. Of course we have the means; but then, we should have to sell out stock, and make other sacrifices not now convenient or desirable.”

“Come, Cubborn, no lectures, no d——d non-

sense—I beg pardon of the lady—I come here for money, I want money, I must have money. That is brief. So despatch. Get ready the papers, and I will sign.”

“Has his lordship looked over his book of late? I think, Mr. Trapper, you gave it to him the last time he was here,” edged in Mrs. Cubborn.

“No,” said the earl, “I left it behind me. He did give it to me, and I just glanced at it. For all I know it was quite right. I suppose it is. But I can’t carry such a document about me. It had better remain here.”

“But when I speak of your book, my lord, I do not of course mean to insinuate that it is not right, for your signature, and Mr. Cubborn’s, with Mr. Trapper’s, are attached to the entry of each day’s transactions with us. I speak of the days you give to business here. But I think it essentially necessary, and so does my son, that you should constantly refer to that book, and keep its accumulating entries against you before your eyes.”

“Have you the book, Mr. Trapper,” said Earl Summers, sharply.

“I think Mr. Snodgepole, so I understand, locked it up when you left, my lord; but I will fetch the key of the strong box, and you shall have the book.”

On the summons of the bell, Mr. Snodgepole drew himself into the room, and took from the safe a small well-bound book with two brass clasps, and moreover locked in the centre. He presented it formally to his lordship, and then quietly retired.

"Has your lordship your key?" said Mr. Cubborn.

"I think not. I left it—ah! somewhere. Never mind, it does not matter now, or, if you like, you can get your duplicate and unlock it."

"But ours is not a duplicate key. There would be no security in that. Chubb made two locks of much the same pattern, but with different wards, so that the same key should not open both. But I tell you what we can do, we will let you have our book, which you know is the exact duplicate of yours, and you can examine it here."

"But that will take up so much time. Never mind; let me have it. If I must, I will look into it. Thanks. Let us glance at the total. What! 560,000*l.* advanced! I won't believe it! Why, that would swallow up all that I had from my mother, shut me out of the Court and the Mines complete, make me a fugitive in the two counties, a beggar in the land! I say I won't believe it. I never had that large sum."

"Will your lordship please to look into the items," said Jonathan, calmly; "it is necessary that you do so."

"Well, I will another time; now I am tied, you see, to a moment. Why it is, I declare, three o'clock. Can you give me a cheque for the ten which I spoke of? I must have it, Cubborn. I will put the book into my pocket, and examine it at another opportunity."

"Not our book, my lord; you forget you are not taking your own copy, but ours. Yours is locked."

"Oh, ah! Never mind. There, Mr. Trapper, keep it for me. Now, Cubborn, am I to have this loan or no?"

"Well, my lord, you have in the most extraordinary and, I will say, uncourteous terms thrown a doubt upon the moneys lent you already. This is not a time to ask for new favours."

"But, my dear fellow, it is only my way,—a devilish sum, though! I ask your pardon, Mrs. Cubborn. I really want this money, Cubborn, and I hope you will find means to oblige me."

"Well, now, my lord, you speak in proper terms. The respectability and thorough integrity of this firm are not to be doubted. It has lasted upwards of a hundred years without a blot on its character. But, my lord, you must admit that we have gone out of our way many a time to oblige you. We have often drained our account at the bank, reduced our government securities and our shares to an extent unusual with us, all to accommodate you. We do expect some consideration—some gratitude."

"Well, I am grateful, I am considerate, I am anything you like to make me. How long, Mr. Cubborn, is this parley to last? I am getting somewhat tired."

"And so am I, really, my lord," said Mrs. Cubborn, rising with dignity. "I think there is nothing more to do but to foreclose."

"Foreclose! what do you mean, madam?—Cubborn, what does all this mean?"

"Pray sit down, mother. Well, my lord, it means, if you will have an explanation, that the

Staffordshire and Shropshire estates, as you hinted, are already forfeited."

"No such thing, I tell you; I never had the money. I will contend——"

"Finish. Oh! my lord, wind up your threat. Your relation, the lord-chancellor, might do you a friendly turn in his court: but even he cannot blot out signatures and annul solemnly sealed and attested deeds, and other documents of equal weight and legal force. No, the whole thing is clear enough in law. You have forfeited, my lord."

"Well, if I have, I must; but for all that I will not believe it."

"There must be no doubt about the matter, my lord. Pray sit down; we are not accustomed to see our clients parading this room."

"I beg your pardon. Am I to have this money or not? Time presses."

"Well, my lord, my honour presses also;—the respectability of this house. Trapper, ring for Snodgepole—yes. Oh, Snodgepole, tell Stickings to assist you over with Earl Summers' box. Take care; there, place it before me. Now, my lord.—You may stay," (this was addressed to Snodgepole and Stickings). "Yes; now, my lord, will you please to examine that deed. Is that your signature? You say it is; well, will you look at that, and that, and that? Nay, I insist that you examine them all carefully before these witnesses. The respectability of the house is concerned. Well, well, my lord?"

"Well, Mr. Cubborn, I cannot tell what it all

means. I come for a simple loan, and I am assailed with a whole volley of proofs of old debts. Oh! hang the old debts—deeds, bonds, bills and all be d——d. If it will satisfy you, I have examined every one of them. They are quite correct, duly attested; there is my unmistakeable, unforgable signature, and your own, and so on. Now, will you say at once whether you will let me have that money?"

"But what security have you to offer?"

"Security! Surely my name is good enough for that small amount?"

"I am truly sorry to say it is not, my lord. I cannot let you have the money without proper security. If you will bring me your father's signature to a bill, the money is at my bank for you."

"You know, Cubborn, that is impossible. The marquis is already highly incensed against me. He says he is indignant at my treatment of the countess, at my extravagant and debauched life, and at my connexion with you, and so on. He will not be answerable for a farthing."

"Perhaps not. The only thing now is to close our meeting. Here, Snodgepole, remove this box, and put it in its place again. But I would have you think seriously, my lord, of those two properties. You know I am a man of my word, and unless within a month I can have at least half of the money advanced, I shall foreclose. This I plainly, emphatically, and finally tell you."

"Yes, my lord," said the lady-lawyer, with great dignity of manner, "Mr. Cubborn intends settling

in life, and those estates would assist him in establishing himself pretty comfortably."

"D—n—tion! I beg pardon. Once more I say for the last time, am I to have that money?"

"Not without adequate security, my lord. Your own name, I am sorry to repeat, is not worth a farthing."

"But my father's, as you said; if I get that?"

"The moment you bring it to me you shall have a cheque for the amount; of course, short of interest, &c."

"Oh, d—n the interest. Pardon,—never mind that. Will you draw up what there is to sign, and be quick about it?"

"Mr. Trapper, take a stamp for 10,000*l.*, and draw a bill at three months, by his lordship on the marquis, his father."

Mr. Trapper took from a drawer in the table a bill-stamp for the amount required, and after carefully inspecting the stamp to see if all was right, he soon filled it in as directed, and handed it deferentially to his principal.

Jonathan Cubborn read the draft slowly, and referred to his pocket almanack to see if the stamp was correct, and then said calmly—

"It will do. Perhaps your lordship would sign it? There,—and here on the back your endorsement. It will require your father's acceptance, payable at his banker's."

"There!" said his lordship, wincing, "there is my signature, and there is my endorsement. Will that do?"

"Yes, that will answer; it will be a good bill with your father's acceptance."

"The deuce it will! Well, what must be, must be, and needs will when the devil drives, and all the musty proverbs. I don't know that the marquis will do it, but I will try; yes, I will try. I suppose if I return at any reasonable hour to-night I can have the cheque?"

"Why, no; we close at eight."

"But," interposed Mrs. Cubborn, with bland dignity, "you can strain a point for his lordship. My lord, if you will bring me the acceptance any time before ten to-night, you shall have the cheque."

"I thank you, madam; I have no time to lose. Fortunately the marquis happens to be in town. *Au revoir*;" and Earl Summers, with a sneer on his lip and a weight on his heart, turned from the lawyer's office. He first hurried rapidly on, then paused, then walked forward measuredly and slowly, and finally, when near the railway station, quietly slipped into the railway inn, and asked for a private room, into which he was shown with great deference. He was well known in Edelstone—one reason for Mrs. Cubborn's wish that the business of the loans should be transacted there—and when he told the waiter that he wished to remain undisturbed and strictly private for an hour or so, that functionary made a very low bow, and stated that his lordship's commands should be respectfully attended to. Nevertheless, Mr. Updown was resolved upon informing himself of his lordship's peculiar business

—staying at the hotel, not for the next train or for any other cause indicated.

“Bring me some sherry and cigars, waiter, and a pen and ink ; and then you can leave me.”

His lordship's directions were implicitly obeyed in all but the total abandonment of the young peer to himself. He was too grand a personage to leave unattended, and so the waiter took up his old and customary position, when not busy below, at a slit in the folding-doors which shut off the private room from the large sal^on beyond. In this quiet and modest way he could see everything that passed in the small apartment, and could reverse the observation when the guest occupied the dining-hall. His watch did not last long before he saw his lordship draw the bill from his pocket, and placing it on the blotting-paper before him, sign it after a pause and consideration of some quarter of an hour.

“Oh ! making a bill,” said the waiter to himself ; “that is his plan of raising money. I shouldn't mind doing a little business with him myself, in a small way, though : but he has those in the town who will accommodate him.”

“There,” said Earl Summers, on his side, “there, it is done ; I must have that money ; I know I shall retrieve it all. 'Tis but now to satisfy those filthy usurers. But I shall have to wait in this den some time, or they will divine my secret ; I must give myself sufficient interval to meet my father.” So saying, Earl Summers drained off two successive glasses of sherry, finished his cigar, and stretched himself on the sofa where he sat. He was tired

and harassed, and being a rather heavy man, dropped into a profound sleep quite against his intention, the bill still lying on the table to dry, in order that the old marquis's strong hand might be the better imitated.

Mr. Updown saw it all, and for the life of him he could not help stealing softly into the room, with napkin in hand, and just looking at the still wet ink on the paper. He was a shrewd, knowing man, understood all about bills of exchange as well as hotel bills, and managed small discounts himself with the same dexterity he practised on the items. On seeing the signature, "Lorndale," across the paper, he started as if he had been stung suddenly, and glided back from the room, awfully fearful of his own motions.

Before eight o'clock that evening Earl Summers reappeared in a cab taken from the railway-station, at the office of Jonathan Cubborn. He was in much haste, and eagerly and peremptorily demanded the presence of the lawyer. This important personage was in no hurry.

"Sit down, my lord, sit down; we must do things regularly;" and Mr. Cubborn rang the bell. Snodgepole drew in his limbs reverentially. "Just tell my mother I want her a moment, if she will please to step down. Tell Mr. Trapper, if he is in the way, Mr. Kilderkin, Mr. Stickings, and all the clerks in my office to attend."

"What the devil is all this for?" said the Earl, who began to be seriously uneasy, though as to any criminal consequences from his signature of the

bill he did not dream; he, through a long career of evil doing, had come to believe that a peer could do no wrong. "What can it mean?"

"Well, my lord, this is a queer world—a dishonest and dishonourable world; it is a wicked and ungrateful world, my lord. I am in no mood for friendship, and wish as many respectable witnesses as I can command to attest the *bona fides* of this transaction, so far as I am concerned."

When his mother had taken her seat with much state, and all the clerks were assembled around the table, Jonathan Cubborn began with a calm composure, taking the bill in his hand.

"These signatures, my lord—the drawer's name and the endorsement—have been executed in our presence. I have now to ask you, whether you know for certain that this is the genuine acceptance of your father, the Marquis of Lorndale?"

The unfortunate and guilty nobleman, who was nervous before, now turned deadly pale, and leaned forward, drooping in his chair.

"This is the acceptance of your father, the marquis, to this bill at three months from this date for ten thousand pounds, is it, my lord?"

"It is the signature of the marquis, my father."

"Very well. Only I could not think of advancing my hard cash if this bit of paper did not bear the acceptance of the rich Marquis of Lorndale. Everything is correct, I suppose, my lord?"

"I believe so. Why do you repeat it? You have my bill; give me the money."

"You must have a statement, my lord; and

the transaction must be entered regularly in the books."

"But I have not mine with me—or rather, I have not the key."

"Stickings, run over for George Graff, the smith, and tell him to come this moment with his picks, to pick a patent lock—a lock of Chubb's—the lock of Lord Summers' red-book."

This errand was performed quickly, and the heavy form of George Graff, the celebrated painter's brother, was introduced into the room with a large bunch of pick-locks of every size and kind.

"Graff, Lord Summers wants you to pick the lock of that book!"

"Very well, sir. Very few can do it. I can." He spent about a quarter of an hour at the task, then said, "There, it is done at last. Am I to set it down to his lordship, sir?"

"Yes, to Earl Summers. Now, my lord, Mr. Trapper will enter this transaction in both books, and balance up, and we shall both sign, if you please."

"But the cheque, Mr. Cubborn?"

"Oh, that shall be attended to;" and the attorney drew from one of the drawers of his desk a large book of cheques, each page containing eight in number. "There, my lord, I think that was the sum agreed upon for the accommodation."

"What! only 9,500*l.*—charge five hundred for the loan, and only for three months, and with—— but no matter!"

"You would say, with your father's signature.

Well, I grant it is a heavy interest; but the risk is heavy too, my lord. Trapper, are the books ready?"

"Quite so, sir; will you be pleased to sign here; and you, my lord, just underneath Mr. Cubborn's."

"A d——d— Oh, I really beg your pardon, madam. I did not for the moment perceive you; but you attorneys are a very troublesome set, and do things in a drawling, roundabout way that no one else would think of."

"Law, my dear lord, is circumlocation; we are obliged to be cautious, to do all things regularly, or the consequences might be unpleasant. A glass of wine, my lord?"

"I thank you, no! I have not a moment to lose."

"To lose—that is a significant word, my lord, to lose. But you can't get that cheque cashed to-night."

"Cannot I? If it were one in the morning I could get it done. Good-bye. Good-bye to you, madam."

"Good evening, my lord. Stickings, open the door for Earl Summers. It was well to have humbled his pride. He will be brought beneath your heel before long."

"And shall I not know how to trample him, mother? Oh! the upstarts—the spendthrift beggars! Let us close a day of fair business."

"What if this bill should not be all right, Natty? I have seen the signature of the old marquis

before—it was not exactly like that—and I remember it well.”

“I only wish it were wrong, that is all! Then indeed should we have the whip hand of this impudent nabob. I wonder how he got the old marquis to sign!”

“He never did, trust me. This bill, Natty, is a new lever in our hands. Wait and inquire, and see what will turn out. But I have that heavy case of Scoggs’ to attend to. You retained Rataplan and Cleary?”

“I did, Mrs. Attorney. I thought it was best.”

“You did well. Now, my lad, do you seek your pleasure; leave business to me. The world wags bravely with us, Natty. Our prospects are glorious. Bid me good night before you go.” Saying this, Sarah Cubborn, the sollicitrix, retired to her chamber; and Jonathan hurried to London for a night’s adventure.

CHAPTER IX.

EARL SUMMERS, THE MARQUIS OF LORNDALE,
AND MRS. CUBBORN.



HE ruined nobleman passed rapidly from Jonathan Cubborn's house for the train, on his way to a West-end gambling house. Now or never he would retrieve his fallen fortunes. Nor did he altogether or all at once fail. A run of marvellous success greeted him night after night. He began actually to count his gains by tens of thousands—or myriads, a much more convenient term ; for enormous stakes were played.

There were fluctuations and sweeping losses, it is true, but at the end of a month of sharp gambling in many ways—on the turf, in the prize-ring, low as it was, in the cock-pit, in the dog-pit, in the rat-pit, lower still as these were ; in aquatics, at billiards, by various ways, in addition to the all-absorbing gaming-table—Earl Summers found himself master of 130,000*l.*—a rich harvest out of the 10,000*l.* borrowed. But what moment of the professional gambler's life is secure ? Another month saw the same adventurous peer a beggar. He was entirely cleared out. All his arts of hedging, or playing at loss and gain in the vast game of universal speculation, failed in the end. Earl Summers was undone.

He at last became serious—he was alarmed.

His inexhaustible bank was closed to him. To face Cubborn for more money after the rebuffs and insults he had met with there, and the perilous means he had adopted to secure the last loan out of him, was an utterly hopeless expectation. His countess was abroad. She had been a perpetual resource in former times ; but, disappointed and disgusted of late, she had cautioned her lawyer and steward from making further advances to the Earl. His debts were pressing—some of them calls of honour ; and he was quite out of funds. In this dreadful emergency he had no refuge whither to turn his head but his father.

That terrible bill was running on, and he must divulge all. It must be withdrawn. He knew his parent was abundantly rich, and that he must of necessity pardon him that great offence. The forfeiture of the estates was not so easily got over. But the Earl, like most unprincipled men, was bold and impudent. He had no genuine sense of shame, or sentiment of true nobility, or feeling of loss beyond the present suffering it entailed. He therefore paid a visit to his aged parent, who was residing on his large Yorkshire estate, at an advanced period of life still directing all its improvements. The Marquis of Lorndale had been in his time a famous politician, and formerly held a seat in the cabinet of more than one government ; but he had long retired from public life, and devoted his latter days to quiet works of benevolence, and the improvement and augmentation of his property in every direction.

He received his son very coldly. For years back there had been alienation between the old marquis and the spendthrift child. He therefore listened to the full confession of the blackest phase of his guilt—the forgery—without any very violent emotion. It is true, he rose from his seat, eyed the delinquent before him sternly from time to time, and paced the room hurriedly.

“Well—a forger—that was a hanging matter till of late. Strange, I wanted to retain the law.” The marquis was speaking to himself. “Well—well—what next? We shall have murder itself one day, or sheep-stealing. Well, my lord, what next?”

Slowly and coolly Earl Summers drew forth the red-book of Cubborn’s from an inner pocket, and unlocking it—for he had found the key—proceeded to explain the fatal contents to his father. The aged nobleman once more rose from his chair—he had sat down—with the red-book in his hand, to examine its pages; and, now shaking in every limb, tottered about the chamber, supporting himself occasionally with whatever came in his way.

“I will not parley with you by any circumlocution; the 10,000*l*. I will see paid, and destroy the evidence of your felony. The estates must go—if indeed they were ever yours to alienate.”

“How, my lord! What can you mean?”

“I have spoken. If the estates were yours to alienate, were my words. I am by no means sure that they were.”

“Why, what mystery is this?”

“Why, that your friends, the Cubborns, might find their title not so sound as they believe. However, that is not the question now. It will be time enough to look into the title, if necessary, when the foreclosure is actually about to take place. I will see to the bill, as I said. Take this note to Hawkins, and he will give you a cheque for five hundred pounds. That, my lord, ends our transactions and connexions.” Saying this, the Marquis of Lorndale waved his son from the room; and the Earl, well aware that further entreaty would be useless, was soon on his road back to London, the cheque—a miserable trifle to him—in his pocket, and he himself lost in thought as to his father’s extraordinary intimation.

He knew his habit of truth and decision well—how clear were his perceptions—how accurate his statements—how determined and prompt his resolution. He saw his doom written in that father’s face. He read it in the sound of his voice. But of this new threat—this mysterious communication and warning—what was he to think? Was not Earl Summers the second son of his father? whose title and estates depended on his mother. Ah! that father had in former years been long away on a foreign mission—our ambassador at the court of Vienna, succeeding the fourth Earl of Wildermere. What if an heir was born then of lawful marriage, and the union with his mother was illegal. But this would affect his brother more directly than himself. He could not and would not believe such villany in his father. Yet was there something—

ay, and that something serious—in the threat of the old marquis.

The aged peer for his part held the secret, and whatever it was, he knew how to keep it. He wasted not a thought upon it now. He only considered how he could most speedily recover the forged bill. For this he commissioned his steward to go to the Cubborns and get *his acceptance* without delay. He gave no explanations, but signed a cheque for the 10,000*l.*, directing that it should be turned into notes at his banker's before the bill was taken up. The faithful servant lost no time in executing his lord's commands. Next morning early he started for London, went to the bank in Lombard-street, cashed the cheque, and made his way speedily to Edelstone. On announcing his name, he was immediately admitted to Jonathan Cubborn's grand room. He soon explained his business. He wanted to take up the Marquis of Lorndale's acceptance in favour of Earl Summers for 10,000*l.*, which, he understood, Mr. Cubborn had discounted. There was a look of inquiry between the attorney and his mother, who was present. The lady replied, "We have parted with the draft in the way of business; nor can we tell where it is now."

"But cannot you trace it?" said Mr. Hawkins.

"That is scarcely our business," answered Mrs. Cubborn, with somewhat of offended dignity in her manner. "Our connexion with the document ended when we endorsed it over to our correspondent. We are inundated with professional busi-

ness, and cannot trouble ourselves with the concerns of others."

"But to oblige the Marquis of Lorndale."

"I don't know him; do you, mother?" said Jonathan, abruptly.

"I have seen the marquis, certainly, but I have not the honour of his acquaintance."

"If I understand you rightly, you decline to give me any information in regard to the present whereabouts of the bill."

"It will be presented at his lordship's banker's when due."

"That is if the holders find it a genuine acceptance," said Jonathan. "At present, as I said, we can give no further explanation."

"Perhaps Mr. Cubborn might be induced to interest himself in the matter if the marquis waited on him. We are unaccustomed to be solicited for favours from any but principals."

"That's our way of doing business," said Jonathan. "Let the marquis wait on us;" and he bent low to a heavy brief before him, while his mother politely rang the bell to usher the steward from their presence.

"Now or never is our time to sweat that old hunk," said Jonathan Cubborn, drawing the bill from the strong box. "Updown was right; it smells like a forgery."

"You ought to know the scent, Natty; but you should thank me for having the secret to work on."

"How is that?"

“How you do forget, to be sure! When I heard that our victim had passed his afternoon and evening in a private room at the Railway Hotel, I guessed there was something wrong, which only confirmed both our previous suspicions as to the genuineness of the signature, and I knew well that Updown could tell me all I desired to ascertain.”

“I never saw a waiter who did not contrive to know the business, be it ever so private, of the parties who visit inns or hotels. They are worth a whole institution of ordinary domestic servants for ferreting out the secrets of private rooms in a hotel, where persons generally go to keep matters exclusive and apart.”

“Well, what you say is right. So I sent for Updown, just to hear what he had to say about the bill. He was very cautious and secret at first; but I soon found means to draw him out, by showing him his interest; and when I had his full and clear disclosure, which I noted down from his lips—that he actually saw Earl Summers write the acceptance, and examined it afterwards while the ink was still wet; when I had all written down and duly signed, I pooh-poohed the whole matter, resolved that my informant should not make a traffic of his secret, or think it of any value. I told him the Earl had authority to use his aged father’s signature, and that it was rather a dangerous thing for a man in a humble position to falsely charge a peer of the realm with forgery.”

“Oh, capital, capital. I owe that fellow a spite.

He was disobliging to me once, and I do not forget it. And so I suppose he went away with a flea in his ear."

"He went away very much chapfallen and subdued, after entreating me not to mention what he had said, as it would be his ruin. So, instead of the weight of thanks which he had expected to descend on him and the heavy reward, he slunk away like a criminal in danger of being charged any day with an atrocious libel and a detestable piece of espionage. Nevertheless, what he saw and reported is true. The acceptance is a forgery, and we must make the most of it."

"What say you to a criminal prosecution, with Rataplan and Cleary in it?"

"The threat might do, if there should be a strong necessity; but the prosecution itself would be an act of insanity. Summers is a beggar. He can pay nothing, and if we are to have our ten thousand pounds hard cash back it must be from his father. But I shall try and double the amount if possible. The old marquis is rich and dry, but I think we can make him bleed."

Hereupon Jonathan half sung, half said:—

"‘I grind the bones,
I squeeze the stones,
I wring out blood from steel,
But in the end
I have no friend,
And am the devil’s meal.’

"’Twas that wretch Spell who wrote this fine poem.

"Tis not very pleasant, after all our successes, to be the 'devil's meal,' mother."

"Nonsense, lad, nonsense. I tell you now, as I have often told you before, there is no devil!"

"And yet, Spell says somewhere that law is the devil's theology. If so, you ought to be a good authority."

"So I am, and I tell you that this, like other legal truths, is a fiction."

While profane and evil jests and suggestions were passing in the lawyer's office in Edelstone, Hawkins, the steward, was hurrying back to the marquis, his master, his mission unfulfilled. He did not for a moment suspect the real cause of the Cubborns' insolence, but attributed their conduct to the brusque and independent way of some lawyers, and their too intimate dealings with the reckless Earl Summers. The marquis immediately received his steward on his return, and calmly heard his recital to the end.

"I am satisfied you did all you could in the matter, Hawkins. That Cubborn firm is a strange and questionable one. I have important business to transact in town; make ready for my departure by the first express train in the morning. You can accompany me."

There cannot be a graver error of judgment in humble people, than in comparing the hardship of their lot with the ease and luxury which the rich and powerful enjoy. We very much question whether the real burden of suffering in this world is not borne by the great and affluent. Small estate, small cares. The higher we advance in the

social scale the greater are the anxieties and troubles, and frequently the heavier the actual load of pains and labours. The Marquis of Lorndale had been a toiler, it may be said, all the days of his life; in his childhood in a disciplined nursery, in his boyhood in a public school, in his manhood in the House of Commons, in his maturer years as an ambassador abroad at a very turbulent period, and as a Cabinet minister in more than one Government at home, in his old age as a husband and father and the lord of vast estates, and now on his extreme verge of existence as the manager of his broad lands and property, and still the parent of a son who, himself of ripe days, was so reckless and wicked as to make the tottering descent to the grave in the venerable peer the most painful and vexed epoch of his active, agitated, and very lengthened career. He knew the Cubborns' character—mother and son. He saw at once what manner of ordeal he had to pass through to pacify them; but he was prepared for the issue. When arrived in the metropolis he did not waste time, and pens, ink, and paper, by making appointments in London with impracticable people. He knew that any such proposal would be useless and utterly disregarded. So he speedily made his way down to Edelstone with his steward as privately as possible. Mrs. Cubborn—always at business—was in the office ready to receive the peer. Her son was at home, but it so happened at the time incapacitated from a previous heavy night's debauch for any manner of professional occupation or duty.

Mrs. Cubborn had the peer ushered into her own

room, where she felt herself supreme, and received him with the utmost deference and ceremony. Hawkins, the steward, by his lord's desire, was left in an outer chamber.

"I have come, madam, for that acceptance," began the Marquis of Lorndale. "I wish to pay the amount and withdraw it."

"My lord, believe me when I say I deeply feel for your unfortunate position in this untoward matter. I will not conceal from *you* that the draft is in our hands. We had early information of the spurious acceptance—you see I use a mild term—and we thought it more considerate and delicate towards you, Earl Summers' father, not to put the note into circulation."

"You speak of information, madam, given you, and of a forged acceptance. With all this I have nothing to do. I have come to see Mr. Cubborn, and to retire the bill bearing my signature."

"My son, my lord, I regret, is not in the way. He is engaged with counsel on a very heavy chancery case; but the clerks and I can manage this business. Sad enough it is; and being a parent myself I can the more readily and sensibly feel your lamentable position."

"Am I to have the bill, madam? I did not come here to parley."

"With all deference, my lord, I think not; it is a forgery."

"It is easier to make such a bold assertion than to prove it."

"Well, my lord, since you put me to it, I must reluctantly inform you that Earl Summers, your

son, was seen to commit the forgery, and that by a thoroughly competent witness."

"This at present is only so much verbiage, a mere *brutum fulmen*; but even if there were any truth in what you say, how do you know that my son has not had his father's authority for using his signature?"

"I am glad you admit the signature is not yours."

"I admit no such thing; in fact, I admit nothing. I only show you the extreme difficulty of your proof, even if you have an apt and ready witness to swear to it. I presume my testimony would outweigh his."

"The evidence I speak of is backed by a mass of circumstantial proofs. But, my lord, speaking solemnly and seriously, are you prepared to pledge your word of honour as a peer that this acceptance is your signature?"

"Madam, I hope my position is too elevated to submit to a categorical examination from a lawyer's wife, or rather mother, if my years and experience do not command sufficient respect and authority to shield me from your cunning questioning. You will be baffled, madam, you and your son, with all your shrewdness. Give up the bill now, or the whole of your transactions with my son—this among the rest—may have to undergo a lengthened Chancery investigation."

"No matter, my lord; we can despise your threats, fortified as we are by truth and irrefragable legal evidence and documents."

"But, as I understand the matter, according to your own showing, if I do not meet this bill, Lord Summers cannot; so that in disputing the genuineness of the signature, you throw yourself back on a source which cannot recoup you."

"We see that clearly enough. But to be plain with you, ten thousand pounds is not a large sum in our heavy transactions; we can afford to lose it rather than compound a felony. At the same time, in consideration of your years and position, my lord, as this reckless young man's father, although he has not used us well, has indeed over and over again broken his word and treated us with abominable ingratitude, yet, as I said, in sympathy and condolence for you, my lord, and being a parent myself, we might be inclined to let the knowledge of this monstrous fraud and villany go no further."

"Now you speak, as you look, madam, like a sensible woman. I am ready with the money."

"Nay, nay, my lord, business of this peculiar nature is not transacted in such a way; there must be a motive for kindness and compassion. You will pardon me, my lord, you are an utter stranger to us beyond your public reputation; and as for the earl, he has proved himself to us, and, I fear, to others, to be a person who certainly merits no mercy or sympathy of any description, if for no other reason than his mean, suspicious, and scrutinizing manner of transacting business, which made it very unpleasant, very unpleasant indeed, and very unusual; in fact, smacking rather of the turf

and card-room than of the candour and trustiness of noblemen and gentlemen. I am sure there was not a signature or a figure of ours that he did not examine most closely and cautiously."

"Indeed! very unusual with him. But my time is limited, madam; let us to facts and figures. What is it you require for the bill?"

"Not a farthing less than 20,000*l.* to part with it to you, my lord. I verily believe the Countess Summers, whom I much respect, and her father, with whom our firm has had large dealings, would have been only too willing, if made aware of the forgery, to cover it by some 60,000*l.* if required. So you see, my lord, I am addressing you from no sordid motive."

"Well, madam, what I require is the bill, and not a lengthened palaver. If you will give me a pen, or cause one to be given me, I will draw you a cheque for the amount you require."

"The pens and ink are before you, my lord."

"Thank you, I see. I think your son's name is Jonathan, is it not?"

"A well known name, my lord, it is Jonathan."

"The cheque is ready, madam, if you will hand me the bill."

"How like Earl Summers, to be sure; cautious to the last! I think, were it only for the deference due to a lady, the Marquis of Lornsdale should not treat this business in his peculiar family spirit. Besides, ours is an honourable and very old standing firm, my lord."

"Pardon my years, madam ; your rebuke, as a lady, is somewhat just ; I yield to the sex," and the defeated marquis handed over the cheque to the heroine before him with a most courteous and affable smile.

"Now, my lord, I present you the bill, which, I again repeat, is not your acceptance, and the sooner it is destroyed the better. There is a lamp, you can light it and burn the note ; wiser, in my opinion, than to retain it on your person in travelling."

"Thanks for the suggestion ;" and the forged draft was speedily in flames, and first a shred of black carbon, then fluttering and scattered feathers of white ashes were all that remained of the perilous document. It was gone for ever, and it took twenty thousand pounds hard cash to destroy it.

"As to those mortgages which we hold, my lord, they are very heavy—our advances have been enormous ; we are prepared to foreclose, and the Staffordshire and Shropshire properties will be ours, unless the whole amount lent, 560,000*l.*, be paid within a fortnight. We have extended our grace far beyond our original intention, and beyond just and considerate limits now ; but we have determined at last to put an end to this unpleasant connexion and business."

"Mrs. Cubborn," the Marquis of Lorndale somewhat solemnly replied, "I admire your wonderful tact and ability ; I only wish they were enlisted in a better cause, but of this I warn you, do not trust too far to your securities. I know a secret that

would render them——” The speaker stopped short.

“ Well, my lord ?”

“ Well, madam, I wish you good day ;” and without uttering another word the Marquis of Lorndale left the room, and joining his steward was soon *en route* for the metropolis.

CHAPTER X.

THE CONSPIRACY IS DISCUSSED—WITH WHAT RESULT.

HEN arrived in town, the first step taken by the old but energetic and shrewd peer, was to go direct to the Home-office, to consult with his friend, Sir Arthur Treffnell, on various particulars connected with the Cubborns. He had carefully noted the proceedings in regard to the bill against Oberon Spell, and also against Hilary Dove; and although the name of the attorneys did not appear in these transactions, he was satisfied that they were the fountain-head of the conspiracy. Numerous other similar cases had cropped up from time to time since, and he had heard that very many had been compromised; but he had no hesitation in attributing them all to the same source. He thought it more prudent to address his friend at the Home-office, than to visit Sir Peter Spry, the chief at Scotland Yard. The minister heard what the marquis had to disclose, but he was beforehand with him. He knew all that had occurred in respect to the suspected house; it was a very remarkable social phenomenon, and he believed it covered a den of most destructive and widely ramified swindlers. But it was no easy task to discover and uproot them. The very ablest and most experienced detec-

tive service of Scotland Yard had been long engaged in the matter ; they could never get beyond strong suspicion. The Cubborns ; Swivel and Son, jewellers ; and the foreign merchants, Wolfstein and Schnapps, were all under surveillance. Ill-looking, doubtful circumstances had frequently been traced to their doors, or necessarily avowed by them ; appearances were bad, often very bad, but no one was subtle, keen and active enough to track the guilt home. The criminal law could not grapple them. From time to time the vigilance of the authorities was increased and stimulated by fresh occurrences of imputed fraud. It was believed that the police would be the victors in the end, but for the nonce Scotland Yard was baffled.

“ Why not,” said the Marquis of Lorndale to the minister, “ change some of the functionaries through whom the information must necessarily pass ? All this matter, you know, has been long before my mind. I have pondered it over, and my serious opinion is that there is some betrayal of official secrets in Scotland Yard.”

“ You think so ? ”

“ Such is my ultimate conviction.”

“ The frequent stopping short and sudden inaction, when it was thought a plain conspiracy was going on, would lead to some such conclusion. It is hard to conceive but that money may purchase intelligence supposed to be sacred when confided to her Majesty’s servants. It would be rather awkward to have a traitor in Scotland Yard ; but I will think over your suggestion and communicate with Sir

Peter Spry. At all events the hideous frauds perpetrated on Lord Summers must be looked into and searched through with no sparing hand. He could never have borrowed all that money; at least he declares he did not to me, although appearances are, I must own, against him."

"He has always been reckless and careless, and it would not be difficult for clever knaves to manufacture any amount of gain out of his mistakes and errors. I shall not trespass further on your valuable time, Sir Arthur."

"You may safely trust the investigation to my department, so far as its criminal aspect is concerned. I shall communicate specially with Spry, and ask him to set his best men at work to ferret out the whole villany."

"My friend, I am eternally bound to you;" and with similar expressions of heartfelt thanks the aged nobleman left the Home-office.

The change recommended very soon took place in Scotland Yard. There was no censure or degradation—no blame of any kind, simply a new disposition of officers, so as to revise the checks found to be necessary even in that focus of the criminal secrets of the empire—secrets of which the majority are doomed never to see the light, but which sometimes serve as a clue to others also concealed, and to those which finally come openly before the public. But the result of the alteration did not add to the facilities of discovery, at least so far as the matter under investigation was concerned. The conspiracy, if one really existed, had ceased its operations, and

spies and detectives were employed on a supererogatory service.

Meantime Earl Summers was communicated with. He was informed that Messrs. Whetstone and Sharp had been instructed by his father to undertake the thorough examination of the whole of his transactions with the Cubborns, with the intention of disputing or setting aside the greater part of their present enormous demand. In answer to the inquiries of the lawyers, the earl admitted that during the ten years he had been dealing with father and son, he may have borrowed as much as 200,000*l.*, which he had not returned, and for which they held *bonâ fide* securities. But the large amount set down against him, he was certain he had never received. When asked to account for his regular signature to the book containing a summary but consecutive statement of all the transactions, he answered that he only made his appearance at Cubborns' when he wanted money, that he was at the time usually under pressure, and did not assume any air of particularity, but performed whatever was asked of him. The book was often presented to him with several months made up at a time, and only the signatures to fill in. Trapper, the head clerk, read from Cubborns' book, and he held his own for correction, to see that they both corresponded. He never examined the items or disputed them; he always assumed that they must be correct."

"But did not those large totals strike you?"

"I suppose they did; but I always bated arithmetic,—figures, even my books (referring to his

various gambling transactions), are to me a bore. I do manage, however, to keep *them* with a little assistance here and there; and I own with shame that although I did from time to time notice those enormous sums, I scarcely understood their import, or was too careless, or even afraid, to inquire. Gad, gentlemen, when you go to borrow money you must be on your best behaviour. I can compare my own feelings on those occasions to nothing but the confusion and kind of obfuscation which come over the victims who get into the hands of skittle-sharpers, and others of the same class. The state of my mind at Cubborns' was always of this alienated and dizzy character."

"But, my lord, are all those your signatures? Pray examine them one by one, and with great care."

"I think they are. I should say that they are."

"Was this book always in your own possession?"

"No, not always. The Cubborns generally kept it. But I ought to state that this was by my express desire. They wished me to keep it at home; but I always had the key, and the lock, as you see, is a special one, made with only a single key by Chubb for the occasion."

"But the fact is, the Cubborns had charge of the book?"

"Generally so until our last transaction."

"What was that? Is it entered?"

"Oh, an affair of a bill. Never mind that; it is all settled."

"Now, taking any one of these items—we speak

of the loans—this one, for instance ; here is a loan of 40,000*l.* mentioned, the date is the 12th of October, 18—, can you recall any circumstance which would give you a clue to the state of your financial matters at that date ?”

“ I cannot at this moment speak as to how I was off for money then ; but if you allow me to run through the book, I will point to some entries at times when I know I was in possession of ample funds, and could not require loans.”

Accordingly the earl singled out several places where large amounts were recorded against him when it was most improbable that he would have borrowed money ; but it so happened that he could never prove he was out of London or its vicinity at the dates ; in other words, that it would have been impossible for him to be at Edelstone on those occasions. Thus very little was gained from the examination of Earl Summers himself or of the documents which he could furnish the solicitors, beyond his own constant averment that he had never received the large amount of money set down against him. As to his transactions with the Messrs. Swivel, and with Wolfstein and Schnapps, they were of the same confused and unsatisfactory character. The acceptances became due from time to time, but he could not remember having given them. Jewellery and other commodities were debited to him, which had never reached his hands, and of which he had no knowledge but his being charged for them. However, he owned he was not very particular ; for the Cubborns used to clear all those accounts, and he

thought it was for them to see that the documents and entries were proper and regular. The risk, if any, he thought, would be theirs who advanced the money and were his legal advisers. The great doubt rested on the deeds and all the other documents and securities which lay in the strong box at the lawyer's office in Edelstone. In that direction, therefore, was the next investigation instituted by Messrs. Whetstone and Sharp. They appealed to the candour and spirit of integrity which ought to be maintained in the profession when the interests of a client were in question; they reminded Mr. Cubborn of the confidential and peculiar character of the relations subsisting between him and Earl Summers, and they trusted to be allowed to look into every transaction and to examine all the securities, without the trouble and expense of taking the whole matter into the Court of Chancery.

Nothing could have been more open and apparently honourable than the reply of Mr. Cubborn. He desired only what was straight and fair. He had experienced some annoyance and much ingratitude; but passing all that, he would allow the closest scrutiny of the deeds and other securities at his office. Of course they would not be removed from his possession. All that he would stipulate for was that he should be duly paid for any attendance his counsel, his clerks, or himself might be called on to give during the investigation. In other words, he would claim costs on his side. This was assented to, and a most elaborate and careful examination into the whole of the circumstances was

commenced at Cubborn's office in the presence of counsel—Messrs. Serjeant Rataplan and Cleary being both engaged to preside on the part of Earl Summers: for the whole inquiry was taking place under their able and experienced direction, while Mr. Pierpoint and Mr. Shrapnel, both eminent Queen's Counsel, acted for Mr. Cubborn.

There was little substantial difference in opinion between the lawyers on both sides. Earl Summers persisted in denying he had received certain sums said to have been forwarded to him or actually handed him; but he did not deny the genuineness of his signature to any of the documents shown him. That signature was very peculiar, and most difficult to imitate, as was admitted by all present, two experts—one on each side—being summoned on the occasion. There appeared to be no irregularity. The books were properly kept; they bore the most scrutinizing examination, and they, as well as the whole mass of securities, came from that severe ordeal untouched and unaffected even in the slightest particular. There was evidently a close business connexion between the Cubborns, Swivel and Son, and Wolfstein and Schnapps. But the entries in the cheque books, and every other transaction between them, appeared to be perfectly correct and regular. In most of the great loans, and those principally disputed, the foreign house had been the bankers. There were, no doubt, several points of suspicion, but there was nothing like evidence of actual fraud. Still the doubt lasted, as

will happen to be the case where guilt exists, and no proofs could remove it. .

Messrs. Whetstone and Sharp attended at the chambers of Mr. Serjeant Rataplan, Mr. Cleary being present. This time Messrs. Ritscrew, Bleadum, and Flay were called in. The latter were asked knowingly by the learned Serjeant whether, admitting that a series of frauds had been perpetrated in this case, they could explain them in any way.

"It is not impossible," said Mr. Flay, "to produce an exact *fac-simile* of a signature. Of course the thing can be done."

"We know that; but then to make all things cohere—the books, for instance, and the stamps?"

"Well, it only requires system, time, combination, and personal labour for all this. Your books may appear quite regular and genuine, the false entries may be always at their proper place and date; the same for the bills and other documents. A properly kept set of books, or those which seem so, are not proof positive that frauds have not been committed; and so on of all documents."

"Then, according to your experience, we may be all at the mercy of any ingenious conspiracy of scoundrels?"

"Unquestionably. The great difficulty, however, would be in getting the right combination. There must be a first-class forger; he must be quite A 1 in his craft; then he must do his business entirely in secret—there must be no sign or mention of it beyond the moment of operation. Let him entrust

to the post the document—say it is a bill—doing so in some neighbourhood out of his course. The chances are a hundred to one it will arrive at its destination. Let the receiver have the key of his own letter-box, the lock being a good one, and when he draws forth the missive directed to him, he sees a scrawl or set hand, a cipher, which he does not recognise; but when he opens the envelope he finds the expected bill.”

“Well, to go on with the fruits of your experience, Mr. Flay?”

“Fruits not found bitter in the plucking, Mr. Serjeant. But the bill once in the hands, say of Messrs. Swivel, or of Wolfstein and Schnapps, they get it discounted at some first-rate establishment with which they deal. Their books and all other things, of course they must see correspond with the transaction. This, I apprehend, is the whole secret.”

“Must not the book-keeper and cashier be necessarily a party to the fraud?” inquired Mr. Cleary.

“These offices may be filled by the parties (the principals, I mean) themselves; or it would be quite possible, though of course more difficult and round-about, to get through the whole with the utter ignorance or only the mere inconclusive suspicion of these functionaries. Swivel’s son—one of the firm—and Wolfstein are the book-keepers, I believe, in their respective establishments.”

“And you think it quite possible that Earl Summers may have been defrauded in this instance?”

"It would not be a matter of great difficulty, admitting that a first-rate forger were at hand. For the whole of these transactions, it appears to me, began and ended in Mr. Jonathan Cubborn's chambers. He is a gentleman I have reason to speak well of, for he has one way or other brought a round sum of money into our firm."

This closed that part of the consultation. The solicitors withdrew, and the learned counsel were now left alone.

"I see nothing but submission in this case, Cleary; there is no loophole for evasion."

"Such is my opinion. To throw the matter into Chancery for inquiry would only be publishing the disgrace of this noble family, and you know what we both have reason to surmise; it could do no earthly good."

"Unless to gain time—there might be something in that."

"Well, we will report accordingly. Will you do this for me? I am set down for that cause of Hippenfog against Tangers for to-morrow, and have not looked at my brief as yet."

The two counsellors separated. Their opinion, duly signed, was returned to Messrs. Whetstone and Sharp the next day, and by those gentlemen the result communicated to Earl Summers and the Marquis of Lorndale. Nothing further was done. The Cubborns once more were triumphant.

CHAPTER XI.

IRIS SPELL TRIES TO CONVERT MRS. CUBBORN.

HE tremendous power held by the Cubborns, mother and son, over Earl Summers' property soon got noised abroad. It was cunningly set afloat in the newspapers by Trapper, who still pursued his old avocation of mischievous paragraphist. The tale got circulation in a one-sided, artful manner. It was the mortgagee's story. The full revelation had to be made. But the first crafty impression was sought, and it widely obtained. The general belief was, that Lord Summers was a very extravagant, unprincipled young nobleman, who had been treated with singular liberality, indulgence, and forbearance by the eminent lawyer, but that his patience being worn out by repeated breaches of faith, foreclosure was now inevitable, unless indeed the heavy incumbrance could be forthwith paid off. Persons who suspected the truth of the story, held a far different opinion, and Edelstone rang with the knavery and iniquity of Jonathan Cubborn and his mother, and with expressions of real sympathy and compassion for the young nobleman their unfortunate victim. Among the circles where this nefarious business was freely discussed, the immediate acquaintance and visitors of Iris Spell were the loudest and most severe in

their condemnation. Ernestine, Countess Summers, was positively idolized in the village. She was one of them, born there, and had identified her active and fruitful charity with the sufferings of rich and poor—attending on the former in their sickness, and on the latter in their pain, privation, and misery. The instrument of any calamity to that adored lady's house would be and was abhorred, and the injury resented with somewhat of the enthusiasm of devotees and martyrs. To stem much of this heated zeal, Iris Spell, who, from the great activity of her mind and her husband's profession, was moving in the midst of it, resolved on seeing Mrs. Cubborn herself, and trying what the force of persuasion would produce on the old sinner's feelings and conduct. She had not arrived at this strange and original determination till after much pondering and cogitation. Iris had, like her father, an overweening confidence in her own powers, and imagined that no difficulty or obstacle was too great for her to overcome. She certainly had done much by her common sense and natural spirit of command heretofore, and she conceived it was quite within her scope now to bring Mrs. Cubborn to compassion and reason. At all events she would try. Her secret lay in her own breast. She would communicate with no one till success should crown her endeavours. If she failed, nobody but Barbara Cubborn, and perhaps her son, would be the wiser, unless indeed the old lady chose to go about and gossip, a line of action quite alien to her life, manners, and conduct. Of late years, since the perma-

nent residence of Dr. Spell in Edelstone, there had been something like a slight rapprochement between the great physician's lady and the strong-minded woman who commanded the house of Cubborn. The two clever women living in the same neighbourhood, must necessarily meet at times, and it was noticeable that recently the solicatrix moved about more openly and freely in the village. She came abroad and seemed to court popularity, or to defy it. Her carriage was seen at the leading shops, and sometimes also at some of the principal mansions—so commanding are wealth and legal position in any community. Whenever she encountered Iris, a gentle inclination of the head and a smile of recognition was the invariable salute, and this always met with a polite response from one who never harboured a feeling of resentment, and who had some remote sentiments of respect for the powerful real chief of the Cubborn establishment, evil as had been its conduct and influence over her own, her husband's, her family's, and her friends' destinies. In fact, there was, one way or other, sufficient grounds of acquaintance to justify a *quasi*-friendly call on the Amazon. Accordingly, without saying a word to Oberon, without breathing a syllable of her intention to anybody, she strolled out one fine morning, entered the office of the Cubborns, and on sending in her card, was admitted to the presence of the great female lawyer without inquiry or ceremony. Mrs. Cubborn was quite prepared to receive Iris Spell—she was always in trim to see clients or visitors. Her costume was

rich, but highly becoming to her age and authoritative station. The signs of accurate cleanliness and studied neatness were only heightened by the costly laces and brocade which adorned her lofty and rather masculine person. On this occasion she happened to be in the best humour with herself, and with the world which she had made her victim with marvellous proficiency and success. A gracious smile hovered around her lips and lighted up her large countenance as she welcomed Iris Spell, and motioned her to a seat before her.

"This is indeed a rare incident—shall I call it a happy omen?—to have a visit from Mrs. Spell, the familiar Iris Dove of long years ago, when we both were much younger. To what, pray, am I to attribute the honour of this early call?"

"Well, Mrs. Cubborn, I shall be plain with you—I have come in reference to the unhappy affairs of Earl Summers."

"Then, I suppose you are engaged professionally?"

"Professionally! what can you mean?"

"I mean just what I say; I generally do. The visits to this chamber are generally professional. Well, madam, what have you to communicate?"

"To tell the truth, I have not so much to communicate as to request. I cannot believe you to be wholly wicked."

"Gentle terms, Mrs. Spell, and we shall get on better."

"Oh, as mild and persuasive as you like; my business is obsecration. I cannot persuade myself

but a woman of your enlarged understanding must have a corresponding soul and conscience, the one concomitant on the other."

"As to the soul, we will, if you please, leave that matter."

"But you surely believe you have a soul?"

"I believe I have what I have, and that I am what I am; I do not speculate further."

"Than the present."

"Well, no. I have never seen a visitant from the other world, and I cannot realize it."

"But revelation steps in to give you belief."

"I tell you what, Mrs. Spell, nothing can give me belief but what I can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel, or which is possible in human experience. To believe truly I cannot go beyond myself in order to rely on others."

"And yet nearly all our belief and knowledge, and many of our actions, rest on this reliance on the testimony of others."

"Ah, granted, so long as the testimony is reasonable, and what every sane man must receive."

"It is most consonant to reason and experience to believe in an after existence. There is no total destruction. You see I can be learned on this matter."

"As learned as you please, madam; but do you see the flame of this taper which I now light to seal an important letter. It has done its service, so I extinguish the light. It is gone! So much for the soul of the candle."

"Ah! you do not perhaps know what I know,

that the soul of the candle, its light, is not destroyed, only obscured and buried. You can illumine your taper again, and it will burn. It is only asleep, and will wake again when you excite the molecules."

"Yes, so long as the fuel, the wax and wick, are there to nourish it; not after that. But what, dear madam, has all this to do with Earl Summers?"

"Oh, a great deal. If you have a soul which will endure after the body has separated from it—as all wise men say—of what avail will be all your ill-got riches?"

"Mrs. Spell, as a condition of this visit continuing, I must have civil words. My wealth is the result of long and arduous labours combined with high professional attainments and exertion. We have relieved the unfortunate earl over and over again when in straits; we have folios of letters of abject entreaty and earnest thanks from him for our repeated kindness, indulgence, and liberality: you understand but one side of the question; and if we now demand our rights and desire the degrading connexion to cease, it is by reason of the infinite disgust we entertain for his lordship's boundless ingratitude."

"But of what use will all your riches be to you in a few years? you are advanced in life, and must be soon in your coffin."

"I know that; it does not appal me. I was sent into this world to fulfil a mission, to improve it and improve my own condition. I hope I have done both, and that I shall continue to do so."

“The judgment on your conduct must rest with a Higher Power. Your fellow men have already condemned you.”

“I do not know that, and if I did I would despise their sentence; but I have the homage and services, and it may be the goodwill, of many. This is all most of us can secure. The world at present is in its infancy, and will remain so till such strong-minded women as you and I take it in hand. We rule our homes, our children, and husbands; there is no man so imperious and despotic that his wife does not govern him. Catherine was the tyrant of Luther, one of the boldest men the world ever saw; and think of the reign of the Medici and of our own Elizabeth Tudor! It is our own fault that we do not sway supreme in the outer kingdom of law and politics, as well as in domestic life, in public as well as in private. I covet wealth not for myself alone, but for a cause. I hate the world as at present constituted, and I live to reform it. We have in England a woman, 'tis true, wisely enough, on the throne, but by a strange anomaly men surround her, and are her government. Believe me to be serious when I tell you that I aim at remodelling, or if you will call it so, revolutionizing all this. I hope to be either the conscience-keeper of the queen myself, or an empress, one day. Nay, do not laugh at me; you, who have achieved wonders for a woman, ought not to deride great aspirations in your sex; or, to unbosom myself more fully to you, if I cannot sway the queen, or become a monarch myself, I shall bid for a republic; my

son Jonathan shall be president, and I then as now will govern him; or it may be that I will become president myself. Will you join me in the struggle?"

"I must consult Dr. Spell first," said Iris, somewhat comically eyeing the aged enthusiast.

"Consult him! Why, I thought you ruled him—that he was a cipher—only your round O which you trundled along anywhere."

"I am my husband's helpmate; but there is not an important movement or action of our lives since our union, which is not and has not been the sole emanation of his will and judgment."

"And of your brilliant suggestion, which is always enough for the purpose. The woman's way must be right, or the house is miserable. There is the secret of our power."

Iris smiled; she knew the full force of that domestic truth. She added, in her most serious and winning manner:—

"Ah, Mrs. Cubborn, you speak as if we mortals had a way of our own here, and that events were solely of human creation."

"So they are. I cannot acknowledge, because I cannot see any other maker of them."

"Then are they very disobedient; for on every side they contradict and contravene human act and expectation. I, for my part, firmly believe we are only instruments in the hands of a Superior Power—that we cannot do as we like—but that whatever be our desires or actions, the final result is with Heaven."

“ Well, I cannot deny that things do turn out very strange at times ; and considering that we plan, arrange, and carry them out with much forethought and judgment, the totally unexpected issue has often puzzled me. But the whole of life is a puzzle, or rather a muddle.”

“ A mystery, madam ; I am full of that thought. I came here for a purpose—I know not whether I shall succeed. But will you hear what my dear husband says of life ? It is poetry, and if you will hear it, I must recite it.”

“ Well, you certainly are a strange, original woman. I believe you worship your husband. I have often heard of your recitations. They have produced some grand effects. I think poetry only a mad, rambling way of saying what, if it be sense at all, had much better be said in plain prose. But favour me by all means, pretty Iris Dove—you see I love the old times. No one will hear you but me in this room. We are thoroughly private here, till I strike the bell. Pray begin.”

Iris stood up once more in her old fashion of declaimer. She was a perfection in this art ; and when inspired by her husband’s poetry, she spoke as a prophetess. The subject she selected now was an abstract one, but she well knew how to give it life and meaning.

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.—A SOLILOQUY.

BY OBERON SPELL.

“ And this the end : there must be some deft key,
Some simple, master turn, to open all

The mystery of life. Doubt and dark
Are in themselves the gates of life beyond,
Which genius doth o'erleap and clear.

That we

Do question, widening still all knowledge here,
Is apprehension that the search is good,
And possible within this mortal bound.

"A leap!—and I am in the sea of truth!
A leap!—how mad a word, without a base
Before or after. Yet, of such wild plunge
Is high discovery, and reason's crown,
The untried, weird anatomy of mind,
And sure effect traced home to phantom cause.

"A leap!—in failure's miserable abysm,
Where thousand projects daily hug blank death.
Howbeit, the seeking will not all be vain;
Each stretch of thought, altho' fantastical,
Grasps ever something of the truth, and leans
O'er wisdom's fountain, whose deep wells unreach'd,
Thin, shadowy mists and dewy films arise,
Which aggregate in showers of pearly good.

"O, Life! O, Mind! O, Soul! O, Being!—dreams,
Made up of false appearances and show,
Yet, only substance of reality!
I better understand that all is nought,
Than that I am a nothing in myself,
Tho' of this self most ignorant and blind,
Whilst ev'rything in part or whole, I know.
Come, then, thou potent mystery, thou magic thing,
Thou only perfect witchcraft in the world,
I'll analyse thee here; the conjuror
Shall task his own dark spell, deluded more,
Than it can e'er delude.

"And first—whence come?
Thou'rt not of earth, for all thy consciousness
And inner essence are of subtle thought
Impalpable. Art thou a spirit, then?
A spirit! No!—the meanest do it of clay
Doth gyve thy freedom, a pin's point would make

Thee dull or mad—the pressure of a straw,
A particle of poison, and thou’rt gone,
Whither?—who knows? The high existences
Cannot be slaves to things so gross and vile;
They must have in themselves vitality.

“Art thou a compound mould of earth and heaven?
Most possible, and this thy second birth.
Th’ embryo in the dim, chaotic womb,
Did pass all forms of matter, from the pulse
Of the spare tissue, thro’ the lizard modes,
And squat, thick-breathing toad, and boss-tail’d ape,
And sex unfinish’d, till the complex man
Came forth to rule the world.

His second birth,
This quaint, mysterious term of threescore years,
Or crude foreshorten’d or extended still!
The soul’s gestation in earth’s purblind womb!
The chrysalis of spirit wing’d for heaven!

“But now the patchwork garment is grown old,
The seams unravell’d, and the shreds displaced,
The whole uncouth and worn, doth shrivel off,
And fall to dust, a vesture used and cast;
The substance soul, a naked, untried ghost,
Is stranded sudden in the outer realms,
A dreary wand’rer on that dark, vague shore,
Which human science never charted. This
The third state, far beyond all mortal ken,
But apprehended by aspiring mind,
Which ever yearns for immortality,
And shrinks from utter death, as something strange,
Unnatural, and alien to man’s life,
His wishes, faith, and progress in the world!

“But comes the mystery of—which is life?—
The waking, or the dream? Is being, mind?
Are all our actions, phantasies and forms?
For sense and thought, to eat, to drink, to sleep,
To speak and move, to suffer pain and die,
To breathe all sympathies of love or hate,
And work all prodigies—a reverie,

An outstretch'd, drowsy vision doth suffice;
 Why not existence, then, a life-long dream?
 Or are our dreams the madnesses of sleep,
 And death a rough and sturdy sentinel
 To startle us to consciousness, and wake
 To real being, in a higher world?

"Here is a coil of reas'nings without end,
 And tangled thro'; the maze and not the clue.

"But what is Reason? This itself is doubt,
 A mystery within a mystery.
 If man thro' all his race one common gift
 Exalts and crowns; say that the light is just,
 And godlike in its essence, wherefore jar
 And dissonance on earth? Were all men mad,
 Then madness would be reason, and crazed thought,
 The wisdom of the world. But call them sane,
 The inconsistency is puzzle rife,
 And reason cannot solve its own dark riddle.
 Oh! 'tis a cloudiness and chaos all,
 And asks some outer ray to pierce the gloom.

"We cannot stretch beyond this hazy air,
 And grasp the spirit world. But plastic forms
 Of varying matter saturate our thoughts
 With constant visions of th' ethereal realms.
 We fancy something like the sky for heaven,
 Our saints are moonbeams in a calm, clear lake;
 Our angels hesp'ral clouds of golden fire;
 The noon-tide shower of light which mortal eye
 Ne'er saw unscathed, mind's intensest stamp
 Of God's all-glorious shadow palpable;
 The lightning of love's summer, in one flash
 Of bright, immortal passion from the heart,—
 A feeling of th' Ecstatic Infinite!

"But, grant we knew the purer entities,
 And could discern the essence of our souls,
 What depth of thought shall sound the heart's abysm?
 What light shall make our social being plain?
 What learning, wit, or fond philosophy,
 Shall charm the hearth and bring the homestead home?

The problem still of kind and wisest power.
All life is but a struggle to keep life,
While that to live is simple as to breathe;
Sustaining elements are everywhere.
All wisdom, shifty patch and seam for flaws;
Whilst, yet, the right we know and hold it good;
This good itself is remedy of ill,
A bastard negative, when happiness,
Poor, yearning mendicant, is at the door
For nature's simple bounty; craving bread,
While we are diving low for sickly pearls.
We starve on hope, pale traitors to ourselves.
This craze of life!—this fact fantastical!
This waking dream! this fiction in strong truth!
This quirk and puzzle jarring in our hearts—
The sphinx and riddle both within ourselves,
And both unsatisfied, but questioning still,
And still resolving, to the final hour.
And, then, the mute interpreter, dull Death—
The only sense and meaning of the scroll,
The sole solution of the mystery,
The unwinding of the cunning labyrinth,
The straight'ning of the crooked warp.—'Tis found,
The talisman, the golden key, is found,
The miracle to prove the miracle!
If this mad oracle of life be dumb,
Why then, the sepulchre must break the seal,
The oblit'rate and unconscious dead must speak
Th' impossible enigma.—Yea! 'tis found,
The revelation of the barren grave!
The taper is extinguish'd, the light gone;
But nought existent once is ever lost;
A dusky glimmer, phosphorescent ray,
Still haunts the ghastly tomb. By its dull gleam
Must we peruse life's dim, mysterious page,
Or take the priest's quaint story as a child.
For religion to be of human use,
Must match the thoughts of babes, and grow with years
Nor barren wait absorb'd maturity,
Or cold, scholastic reason, whipping proof,

Till faith and act are lost in argument,
And chaos broods o'er mind distraught with cares.

“ ‘ Here we see darkly ! ’ All our natural joys
Are baby fancies of the dim unknown ;
Sun, moon, and clouds, and meanest molecules,
Trick'd-out for children, not for growth of mind ;
Thus false appearance is the law of life.
Our senses breathe illusion, and the true
Of all things mortal is the most untrue,
Most strange, and most uncommon, in the world ;
A mystery maturity would clear
And devious science ; but which still enthral
Our inner feeling and the routine hours
Wherein we live and move as humankind.
For matter in our vision is a dream,
A comely dream from uncouth substance wrought,
And ugly entities and grotesque forms ;
And Faith a Legend of the unseen life,
And way to higher realms, obscurely writ,
But charming hearts to good, its moral end
And most divine proposal, till we see,
Without the veil of fiction, ‘ face to face.’
Of all the stories told, the Christian tale
Is far most chaste and seemly, therefore best,
And nearest God, where most authority,
And largest good, and longest time prevail.
Th’ infallible, the abstract, purely true,
In matter, mind, and spirit, interdict,
Believing ever is the state of man ;
Not proof, but trust, his soul’s felicity !
A pleasing seeming his delight on earth ;
The probable, his highest certitude ;
And superstition still his fondest creed !
NON POSSUMUS, the seal of mortal birth ;
And Truth, if Truth there be, beyond the grave.

“ Light from the sepulchre, a higher world
And purer state, to match the yearning heart,
The soul, and intellect, with their great powers
And aspirations, rising to the height

Of Godlike argument, creative act,
 Heroic deed, good works, and holy thoughts,
 And beautiful desires, beyond low earth
 And purblind being, where we grope, wall'd round
 By doubt and darkness, struggling to be free,
 Thro' pain and evil and infinite woes ;
 A penal term, alien to man and God,
 And only just as punishment of sin,
 Or travail for a glorious second birth.

“ One truth is clear beyond all doubt or qualm—
 We have within us thought-creating power,
 Which husbands daily life, and ranges grand
 Thro' wide infinitude, and soars to heights
 Of possibilities beyond our world,
 And in a future centres all our joys.
 If death be doom for this transcendant soul,
 The gift, a treach'rous instinct, most repels
 Of all the monstrous things our sense abhors.
 Annihilation is the hideous birth
 Of human change by ignorance express'd ;
 A growth unnatural, and false and foul,
 And gross and evil in its consequence ;
 An ugly and forbidding, sterile thing,
 From which we shrink with all our powers of heart,
 With all our mind, with all our strength and soul !
 And death itself is only loss of life ;
 The instrument is mute wherewith we erst
 Discours'd divinest music to the spheres.
 The power which woke the harmonies may play
 Its grand conceptions in celestial realms,
 Beyond the ears of dull mortality.
 For faith and nature here are arbiters—
 Belief and feeling. Mind's anatomy—
 The thin abstraction of the ghost of thought,
 Becomes the substance of a mighty scheme
 Which bodies forth a future for our souls.
 Philosophy and Faith and mortal Hope
 Bear witness—three !—arch-trinity of mind,
 That spirit lives beyond the stolid grave.
 The riddle's solv'd—the problem satisfied.”

"Thanks, dear madam ; very charmingly recited, and quite a lesson to our new-sprung school of public readers, who neither read nor declaim, but give us a hotch-potch of both, marring the best passages of our prose and poetry."

"But what do you say of the poetry you have just heard ; I suppose you think it a bore ?"

"Well, being an argument, it would be all the better in prose. Poetry is so hard to understand. No wonder people will not read it. Why, to know and feel it thoroughly, one would require to weigh every line, sometimes every word ; and how few have time or inclination for this in our days of rough-and-ready news ! I am surprised that intelligent men, who could do so much better, can waste time in composing it. In fact, the marvel with me is, that clever persons will follow literature at all as a means of bread. It really requires more sense, learning, ability, and labour than any profession I know of, and it is paid so wretchedly. I am glad you made your husband a doctor."

"He made himself one, madam. But did you understand the poetry ?"

"Well, not exactly. I should require to study it. No doubt 'tis very good, but rather circumlocutory. Perhaps you have it in print and will favour me with a copy ; I shall then be enabled at a leisure moment to do it more justice."

"You seemed to follow me."

"So I did, dear madam ; and I have been accustomed to follow close arguments and deep reading, but not put exactly in the same way. How-

ever, I thank you for the pains you have taken. It has done me no harm to listen to you. The verses left a kind of impression for good; and that perhaps is all that one ought to expect from a first hearing. But my notions are very peculiar: while you are all for the control and interference of Providence in human affairs, I am for believing we are left to ourselves, to our natural and social resources, and that if the Supreme Power regards us at all, it is only to derive pleasure from our actions. Our very delusions please Him."

"Our delusions!"

"Yes, our delusions. From the cradle to the grave we all follow delusions, and live in and by delusions. The material, moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, and religious world is a mass of delusion and error to us, cleared up here and there by human intelligence and labour. If this clearing up itself—this discovery of truth according to our notions—be not the grandest deception and error of all. I believe delusion to be in everything."

"Here we see darkly."

"We do, indeed, on every side, but the darkest corner is certainly that of religion."

"It would be naturally so from the subject."

"Well, my opinion is that all the religions, however conflicting and contrary, do good some way, and that Providence is not displeased at the errors, but permits them. They will be swept away, I suppose, as other obscurities have been, some day, or higher beings created to understand them. I have myself grown out of a deal of nonsense in

my time. So, no doubt, have you. In fact, I am self-educated, and by public lectures and the constant reading of subjects of close thought and reasoning, which yet embrace a wide range of experience and knowledge, and of late by attending places of worship, I have sprung up to an intellectual position in some degree equal to my high aspirations."

"I was glad to see you of late at church on Sundays."

"Well, my dear, to be candid with you, I do not go for piety sake, but to hear the best arguments on high things—matters we must talk about sometimes. I get a good idea or two every time I attend church. But I do not confine myself to the Church of England. I go everywhere to find clever preaching, all I care about, or which is worth the time and trouble."

"I only wish your son accompanied you."

"Well, I wish he would. It must do him some good. He is a rough diamond. Nothing, I believe, will polish him."

"Ah! trust me, religion will. It holds the rudest people, and even savages, in check."

"Thank you for the graceful allusion. But I do really wish my boy, as I will still continue to call him, would attend to church or to anything which would make him better. I myself can manage very well without religion; but I am sorry now I did not train him up to a creed of some kind. I really do not know how to get hold of him, or what to say to him. I have no stand-point."

"That is it. We could not live in the world at all without religion."

"The Chinese live without it, and thousands and thousands live in the world with not a thought of it in their actions or dealings."

"The Chinese do not live without religion ; it is an error to say so. They have most of them the faith of Buddha to guide them and hold by, and the philosophy of Confucius, and whole masses of moral and sage maxims and traditions to regulate their still very primitive and unprogressive society. And as to the practical atheists of the world, most of their thoughts and actions are in some manner influenced by religion and religious recollections, notions, and opinions. But cannot I persuade you to relax your severity towards Earl Summers, and do him justice?"

"Justice! he has not only had justice, but mercy, tenfold. We have been most compassionate."

"He says, and most people believe him, that at least two-thirds of your demand is extortionate."

"He says a—— No, I will not be vulgar, if you are. If he could prove his calumny, he would soon plunge us into the Court of Chancery."

"And the estates are to pass from him, the lawful owner, to you?"

"So it is, my dear madam. These changes do good to the world, they constitute progress. We shall administer the property more wisely, and this will benefit society. I read something of the kind once in a leading article in a newspaper."

"Ah! my husband's, most likely. Do you know

I have heard from your lips to-day many things he has written."

"I am happy to be so far right in your opinion. In what paper did he write, dear madam?"

"Ah, that is a professional secret; but it is a matter of triumph to me that his writings have influenced you."

"Even to the injury of your client, Lord Summers? This is not professional. But I own that the leading articles of the newspapers have been my great instructors and guides, in fact, my alpha and omega. They are the Bible of the time."

"So long as they hold fast to the Christian code, no longer. But can I not make any favourable impression on you—soften you?"

"You have done so, believe me. I am much obliged to you for this polite and well-meant visit; but it must close now, professional matters of weight depend on my serious attention at this moment. I must wish you a very good morning, Mrs. Spell."

"And for Lord Summers?"

"Oh, he must go the way of other spendthrifts. I am sure he is much indebted to you for this persistent advocacy."

"I do it for Lady Summers, not him. I scarcely know him."

"For Lady Summers! your old rival and enemy with Oberon Spell. Oh for shame!—for womanly shame and pride!"

"For Christian love and forgiveness, madam. Who that knew him would not love my husband? Even you would!"

“I don’t know that. Well, good-bye. Before you go, will you allow me to kiss your forehead?”

“My lips, if you like; and may they be the seal of goodness on your heart.”

Barbara Cubborn pressed her mouth delicately and tenderly on the brow—not the lips—of the noble woman before her. A deep chord was struck in her nature: she ought to have had a daughter; without such a tender example and souvenir her gleams of good became evanescences, and she fell back into darkness.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. CUBBORN AND HER SON.

HE conversation of Iris Spell had, however it may have failed as a moral check, produced a certain elevating effect on Mrs. Cubborn. She now felt that she required to be exalted, and she was willing to be borne along by whatever stream flowed towards the desired haven. She bore her victory in the legal investigation with calm dignity; she had planned it, arranged it, worked for it, expected it, awaited it: it was the skilled labour of years; she was now to reap the matured fruits of a life of ability and toil, and was approaching the grand climax of her inflated ambition. She followed method and system in everything. Those vast estates once acquired, herself and her son must enter on a new life—pursue a loftier career. But her difficulty was that son; she traced in him many of the low propensities of her own father, whose drunkenness and evil habits had made her early home infamous and wretched. Since Jonathan had lost the direction and control of the only being he held in any manner of real respect, his father, he had run a wild course, and become in many ways unmanageable. Cunning and secret still, and persevering and bold in the pursuit of crime and the acquisition of gain, he partook of

its fruits only as so much corrupt aliment for his degrading vices. The contrast between her son so wicked and coarse, and the good and graceful Iris Spell, forcibly struck the now aged parent. She lamented that she had not a child like that heroic woman. But there was no use in murmuring; Jonathan was her son, of her own breeding, nursing, and rearing; she must not waste a thought on others, but make the best, or rather the most, of him. To carry out her purpose, she called him to her side on the first opportunity, and began in the manner most likely to win his attention.

“It will not do, Natty, my dear, that this slavery of business shall for ever continué. We must rise with our fortunes, and set up for grandees. You will be a great landowner, I a rich dowager; but the attorney firm must end. This practice will sell well; and as for the partnership—you understand me—it has given us much trouble of late, and fixed ugly eyes on us—that must be dissolved. But all in good time. We shall retire from vulgar, prating Edelstone to our grand estates, Nat, and become county magnates. Cockburns, mind, not low Cubborns. You, of course, will marry some lady of rank, or better still, a great heiress, to increase the property. No matter for your accident, gold will buy anything, women among the rest, and with wives ugliness in their husbands is not a sin, or so many beautiful creatures in the world would not accompany deformities to the altar. As for me, if you play your part well, I shall be contented to give place to you—to see you first a magistrate,

then a member of parliament, then a minister, then premier, and I hope a peer of the realm. Do not laugh, boy, these things are quite within expectation and reach, if you only stretch up to them. But, if you fail me, and I have no one to sustain the house, I will continue my present career of emancipating my sex, revolutionizing the whole system of masculine usurpation and tyranny, establishing genuine free trade in mental as well as bodily labour, and rising to my normal position in a newly organized society, become—— But I will not boast now; you know my aspirations—the scope of my ambition. Much of this, I say, I am willing to place in abeyance, provided you, my son, act your part well, and maintain the position of your rank and wealth with sufficient dignity.”

“Well, let it be a bargain, mother; I can be lofty enough. And don’t I owe a grudge or two to those snobs of counsel!—they have such a way of putting you aside, or sneering you down. I hate Mr. Attorney and Mr. Solicitor, and Pierpoint and Cleary and Rataplan, and all of them; and there’s a batch of our own fellows whom I abhor. Wont I pay them off, and that Spell and the rest of them; but above all, I detest that minx Iris, if for no other reason than because you have taken an enormous liking to her. I will leave my mark on her and her man. I don’t forget Mile End-road, or Marlborough-street either. I have it in for them. But, mother, what is to be done with Elizabeth?”

“Oh! that creature. I wonder you will obtrude her on my notice. But since you are so indelicate,

take my direction : Pension her off, Nat, and let her retire to the Continent. As I suppose the question must be asked, have you any ugly little incumbrances, Natty?"

" Well, they are not very pretty—they are ugly ! but people say they resemble you ; a strong family likeness. I have five altogether, mother, four boys and a girl, but two are legitimate."

" Are what ?"

" Legitimate ; that's plain enough, isn't it ?"

" Legitimate ! legitimate ! what can you mean ?"

" I mean just what I say. Two of my dear children are legitimate, born in lawful wedlock of Jonathan Cubborn and Elizabeth, *née* Maggs, his wife. We were married fast enough, four years come next November, in Whitechapel.

" Married ! fires eternal !"

" You don't believe in fires eternal, mother, so there's no use in talking nonsense about them. What's the good of money, if it don't make one happy ? I am happy enough with my boys and girl—and there's another coming—and happy after a fashion with my wife. But don't imagine I was fool enough to marry her for love. Oh, no ! never dreamed of such a thing. It was from fear—down-right, snivelling fear. She somehow had got hold of the right clue to our secret, and she threatened Gimlet, if I did not take her to church. We were not then such mighty people as we are now, and to silence her I walked her off to Whitechapel and married her."

" And destroyed a life's hopes. 'Tis all over !

Where is the use of my labours, and toils, and vigils, and plannings? Gone! gone! We must for ever bow the head now."

"What could I do? I had nobody to consult."

"Had you not me? Did I not tell you to attempt nothing without my direction and sanction?"

"Consult you, indeed! A pretty pass you have brought us all to—my poor father an exile abroad—I a swindler and forger—this practice an enormous fraud and tyranny—and you a name abhorred and loathed! No, no, I did not dream of consulting you. If I had, what could you counsel?"

"Poison, or the rope, or bribes—thousands upon thousands of pounds; or other ways—oh! other ways, other ways—there are many—anything, I say, but marriage—irrevocable marriage. Just, too, when I had set my hopes so high, to have them all crushed, annihilated! The curse is on our house! I see it, I feel it black upon us. To marry a low, lewd trollop of a servant girl!"

"You forget, mother, that I had an example in my father. He, too, married a low, lewd trollop of a servant girl, and under a far worse threat than I. He got for his weakness or fears a tyrant; Elizabeth, at all events, does not bully me—I should know how to serve her out if she did. Ha! you are in tears! You feel this touch you home, do you? Cry away, 'twill do you good. Whom have I to blame but you for the guilt and misery of my life? I was brought up badly. All that my father taught me and I had learnt at school, was

undone at home by you. I should never have quarrelled with Spell only for you. You disliked his superiority, and made me hate him—hence the fight and this forbidding face. Spell was a good fellow, but you were jealous of him, and made me envy him. You see the consequence. Then, you drove away my father. He is happy now, miles off from the tigress who made a beast's den of his home. You have turned an old and large practice into a horrid fraud and swindle. You sat down and taught me to forge and plunder. You planned and prompted the destruction of Spell's papers. You made knaves and thieves of the Swivels and Wolfstein and Schnapps, who hate you, and would hang you and me to-morrow if they had the power to do so, or send us to penal servitude if they had the necessary evidence, and could save themselves. You made me plunder Earl Summers wholesale, and torture and rob hundreds of others; and now you would set me up as a great nabob—a county magnate, forsooth—nothing less than prime minister and a peer of the realm will suit! But I laugh at you and your highflown notions. Everybody says you are mad about your Rights-of-woman nonsense. A female Lord Chancellor, or a Queen or Empress, or She-President of the Amazon Republic! Oh my! oh my! I shall split my sides with laughter!”

“Peace, whelp, or I will destroy you!”

“No you will not. I will destroy you first. You have made a devil of me—we shall go down together. I see the fiends dancing around me

every night ; and Elizabeth and Trapper dangling me, as a doll, at the end of a rope. My life is a torture to me. I am glad to drown my cares in wine or anything."

Mrs. Cubborn, who had received a terrible shock—perhaps the worst of her life—began slowly to recover her fortitude. She listened to her son, at first with astonishment and trepidation, then anger overwhelmed her ; but as he went on, describing her enormities and saddling her with the entire guilt, something like an abhorrence and dread of him seized her. She remembered, too, that madness was in the family. Her own father had been in a lunatic asylum. She saw her proper line of conduct and action in a moment, and took her determination.

"What is done is done, and cannot be undone now. We must conclude this business of Earl Summers, and settle down to our normal position. You have assumed yours. Submission is your only course—submission still to me. The estates are mine—you know they are—legally mine. To save appearances you have been made the mortgagee, but I can come down upon you in a moment and reclaim them through Trapper. No matter for that now. Rich you shall be ; powerful you may be by dignified and proper behaviour and management. I know the woman, your wife, well. She is no idiot. She will rise with you and elevate her children, if you only lead the way. But, feel assured, she will imitate you—she was never made to be a chief among her sex."

"As you are, mother, who never read a Prayer-book or Bible; and who made your son despise religion, principle, and honour."

"Silence, sir!—silence! We must have no rebukes here. I never suffered them from your father."

"No; you hectored him till he cut. He is now well and happy."

"How do you know that?"

"Know! do you think I know nothing but the evil you taught me? I know where he is, how he is, and all about him; and that there is another brood of Cubborns rising in the family. But do you dream I would tell you?—no, let the poor fellow live in peace. He is happy. I shall be so one day when I have paid a debt or two home. None of your fine fandangoes of prime-minister-ships for me, but a beautiful chateau and place near my father, far, far from you, mother."

It would be painful and even repulsive to report further the unhallowed conversation which passed between this lost child and his mother, at a moment which was intended on one side to be a resurrection from past evil and the burden of guilty care, the entry on a new life of pomp, character, and greatness. The contrast between the hope and the reality was terrible and shocking. The strong-minded woman felt how lonely she was in the world, with her wicked son now in arms against her; and how far lonelier yet she might be when he should be away, like his father, in some distant country and scene, perhaps near one another,

scoffing and maligning her, the controller of their destiny. When thoughts like these assailed her, she would turn with all the heart awakened fresh within her, to the noble woman who had counselled her to good, and who had obtained such a strange hold, it may be said, of Barbara Cubborn's affections.

But neither retrospection, nor remorse, nor new plans or hopes turned that bold, determined woman aside from her settled purpose. She was not made to bend and relax her energy in the face of adverse circumstance. Contradiction only gave her new vigour to soar again and conquer. Barbara Cubborn was herself once more—the genius of evil. She resolved to show neither Lord Summers nor any one else in her power the least shadow of mercy. The mortgages were to do their work of eviction, and a hundred acts of oppression against others were to inaugurate and crown her final campaign in Edelstone.

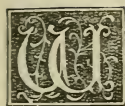
On his side Earl Summers was resolved to fight a firm and brave battle. He might be said to have a double interest in defeating the Cubborns. From the few significant words which had dropped from his father, he inferred that if the estates were on the point of being forfeited to the Cubborns, another heir might be found in that extremity to dispossess him and them, and thus secure the property in the family. But that if the mortgagees were defeated, things would be allowed to rest as they were, without question or disturbance, in the manner of many an estate of almost as great extent and importance.

On pondering the matter over, he remembered to have heard in his childhood something about a union of his maternal grandfather with a foreign lady whose descendants, if living, that is, admitting she had any, would undo the title of his mother to the Staffordshire and Shropshire estates, and leave him a simple younger son of the Marquis of Lorn-dale, without other hereditary distinction than an inalienable peerage. The affair, however, was seldom mentioned, and then under a ban. In time it got to be regarded as a kind of ghost-story or gossip—a forbidden mystery.

The Earl was therefore every way concerned in unravelling the conspiracy by which his property was placed in jeopardy. But this for the present was an impossibility. Scotland Yard was at fault; the ablest detectives in the country baffled. The sole remedy left was Chancery—to dare public exposure and push the whole affair into that legal maze and puzzle. If it could not avert, it might delay the confiscation.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ARTIST.



WE shall now take a glance at the career of the artist. He was the same hard-working, plodding painter as ever, devoted to making so many thousands a year, and through that winning distinction. No one of his pictures could be pronounced a masterpiece or the production of genius, but they could boast of that happy mediocrity which never provokes severe or special criticism, and which perhaps is the general characteristic of English paintings. By this means, and by keeping always on the best terms with persons of influence of every class, Hugh Graff still maintained a high position among a host of far abler competitors. He had a grand house exquisitely furnished, his wife gave regular parties and receptions; his father-in-law was a man of much consideration, and now a member of Parliament; he managed to keep his name as an artist, by one contrivance or another, constantly before the public; and by the exercise of a wary tact more than by the excellence of his works, he got to be esteemed a fashionable—that is a kind of great—painter, whose pictures ought to command a heavy price in the market. This, in reality, was all he

cared about, as he knew the possession of wealth would endow him with genius in the eyes of the world, if he thought the reputation of that gift worth contending for or desiring.

But his unremitting labours—the incessant calls upon his palette—one commission crowding in on another, had begun to produce their effects on his frame. Hugh Graff became prematurely old. He was no longer the sleek, round little man who looked so amiable, was so quiet, and spoke with that “low, sweet voice” which glides insensibly into the heart. He was flabby and work-worn, and sometimes he was even caught speaking sharply, if not loudly, and answering with bitterness. This was especially observable in his conversation with his wife; in his studio and with the generality of people he was the same smooth, tranquil, innocent, childlike man as ever. His dress was still the pink of perfection. It had of late years assumed a certain professorial character, or rather that of some dignitary. A bishop’s hat, a waistcoat single-breasted and buttoning straight up to his throat, a long black coat, and sometimes a kind of spencer over it, with trousers generally of a dark colour, marked him out to the vulgar—and we are all in a certain degree vulgar in our deference to dress—as a somebody—a person of distinction. Then he was fond of dating his letters from the Athenæum, and altogether put on the air of a man of consequence. But this effort at outside show did not save him from the wear and tear of continued application, and on the whole it might be said that

Hugh Graff's real position was far from being one to be envied.

His family, moreover, was a constant source of annoyance and trouble to him. The Graffs were a never-ending tribe. The name was remarkable, and they turned up everywhere. There was a whole race of young Graffs, and the "Hughs" among them was somewhat astounding. It appeared as if no other name could be found in the whole Christian calendar or in our general nomenclature. There were infantile attempts at art, too, by other Hughs than the Royal Academician; and the great man was constantly bored with sketches and daubs, on which he was obliged to offer some kind of opinion. Then there was no notion of deference or submission in any of his relations. It was all Hugh, and Caroline, and Egbert, and Adeliza, and so on. The whole of the artist's family, including his wife, were addressed familiarly, as of the one household, and not unfrequently by the diminutives Hughey, Carry, Eggy, and similar pet terms. Then there were weddings and christenings, and special family occasions, birthdays, &c., with a plentiful inter-sprinkling of troubles, borrowings, appealing notes, distressing applications; now and then a failure or an open bankruptcy, sometimes even a police case, and a whole accumulation of forgotten favours, and the most boundless ingratitude. This was a serious drawback to the painter's respectability and happiness, and one from which it was impossible to escape without an appearance of snobishness and unnatural behaviour.

But his mother-in-law was the most tormenting among all his persecutors. She was ever finding fault with his neglect of her daughter, and the wretched life "the poor girl" led with a family of sick and feeble children, while he was sporting abroad, at his club, or in that eternal studio in Welbeck-street. Mr. Lever too, who permanently resided in England now, was by no means satisfied with his son-in-law. Somehow he found out that the marriage was altogether a mistake, and there was not one of his grandchildren whom he could select as likely to be ever qualified for his successor. In the midst of his public cares, he would often complain of this his bitter disappointment to his wife, as if she and not himself had been the prime mover in bringing about that miserable union.

"Look at Oberon Spell," he would say. "There's a noble fellow, with everything against him; a wife who was no credit to him, and who was utterly penniless, and had a kind of scapegrace of a father, and a mother with a spotted character—he with enemies on all sides—those malignant Cubborns, the Wheatleys, and I too may add in sorrow, ourselves—he after having been held up as a common swindler in an affair which I am now persuaded was a villanous concoction—after breaking down from incessant labours as a literary man and a journalist—rises supreme above these accumulated afflictions, misfortunes, and obstacles, and is now one of the most eminent of our leading physicians. The girl liked him too. Ah! it was a sad day, my dear,

when I listened to you, and chose that miserable shrimp of a painter for my son-in-law."

"Ajax, love, you forget that Graff was your choice. You first brought him amongst us."

"Yes, as a poor artist whom I could patronize and encourage. I had no notion that he would sneak into your confidence and that of the poor, misguided girl. I would not mind if the children were anything. I declare I will adopt one of Spell's boys—noble fellows they are all—if he will let me."

"I have no earthly objection. You know they are my little nephews, my dear."

This was the burden of many a controversy, or rather domestic conversation, between the successful engineer and his wife. Whatever their separate views were on other points, they both united in regretting their daughter's marriage; and even if it were not so, and on this subject also there were differences, Mrs. Lever was too well bred and naturally amiable to contradict her husband.

It must not be supposed that all this time was one of alienation and distance between Oberon Spell, his mother, and the Levers. Many circumstances had intervened to produce a reconciliation. The accession of wealth and position to the physician, Mrs. Trensham's vastly improved fortunes, the necessity from time to time of procuring thoroughly friendly medical advice for an ailing family—and perhaps the engineer's newly-sprung real appreciation of Oberon's worth—all combined to bring the relatives together again. Iris occa-

sionally visited the Levers, and was present at some of their parties. But she evidently was not a favourite, and she did not care for pressing her company on persons who, in a measure, were jealous of her genuine and superior attractions. They could not understand her, and they charitably preferred avoiding her society to censuring her, so that the polite coldness was mutual. But Oberon was a greater favourite than ever. Whenever he could be tempted to join the family circle of the Levers he was most welcome. He had become reconciled to Hugh Graff long ago through the instrumentality of his mother. The painter, who was heartily ashamed of his intimate acquaintance with Cub-born and his own misconduct, found many occasions to express his sorrow and atonement. Perhaps this was genuine, or if not so, the seeming of Hugh Graff was so permanent and real, that even to himself—almost to his inner convictions—it acted the part of true feeling and earnest friendship. Anxiety for the artist's health was the chief motive which induced Oberon to renew the old amity. Hugh Graff, to that discerning eye, betrayed incipient but unmistakeable symptoms of consumption. It was the opinion of the physician that this fatal malady—the result of a rotten system born in the body and impossible to expel—could nevertheless be retarded for years in its mortal approaches. But the disease had been creeping on the painter for a lengthened period, and during his coolness with the friend of his youth. Had Dr. Spell been all along on terms of close intimacy

with the companion of his childhood, he could not have failed to discover the secret enemy working within and undermining that feeble constitution; but it was a singular retribution that the doctor and friend was absent at the time when his advice and guidance could have effectually checked the silent inroads of the disease. Tubercles had been formed in the lungs before Oberon had an opportunity of detecting the presence of phthisis. When he did so, he called in the aid and experience of his friend, Sir Ulysses Kennard, and both, after a very careful diagnosis, agreed that no time must be lost; the patient would have to totally change his system—his commissions must remain unexecuted—his art discontinued, perhaps abandoned for ever—his prospects of the presidentship—and these were not mere empty pretensions or presumptions—entirely forfeited. In a word, the two able physicians found that death had pronounced his black sentence on the painter, and they had but to manœuvre for a long day without any hopes of a final reprieve from the usual normal term.

Hugh felt the deadly stroke within himself. He scarcely needed the warning of his friend. It was hard to tear himself away—not from his art, although he loved that well enough—but from the thousands sterling he made yearly by his palette. This privation was the acute pang—the stoppage to his wealth and ambition.

“No matter, Oberon, I see it all before me—the dark, dismal scroll of death—no matter. The day

cannot be far off. How long do you think, my friend?"

"With care, dear Hugh, you may survive for years; but it must be with great care."

"I say again, no matter. To me the end has already come, all my hopes are buried. Ah, Oberon, you were blessed with Iris; I ought to have had her—she was mine rather than yours. She has taken care of you; I had no one to take care of me, but eternal discontent and grumbling at home. I was only valued for the money I could bring in, or the distinction I could confer. Caroline never loved me. I know I never loved her. People call me selfish; I am not so, 'tis they who are selfish. But 'tis all over now, and yet not over while those sickly children live to perpetuate my malady. I now see, Lever sees, she sees, and Caroline sees, the origin and cause of all the disease existing amongst them. Like me, they too are rotten. Nay, Oberon, let me go on, it will do me good; I want to open my heart to some one. I never could do so to my wife, and my own family and I have been separated for years, except indeed, poor things, that with all their industry they could not keep themselves, and think I am a mine of gold to dig from at pleasure. But, coming back to my subject, I must tell you that for years, almost since I came to London and began to prosper, I have not had a day's happiness. Do you know, Oberon, I have forgotten my prayers, and found myself—I am ashamed to own it—tripping once or twice yesterday in repeating the Belief.

All, art, friendship, religion, love, pleasure, health, everything has been buried in the cursed pursuit of wealth and ambition. Oh! how I envy my poor, laborious brothers—the smith and the carpenter, and the paper-hanger, plumber, and house-painter. They have had their ups and downs, but their life has been an elysium to mine, and their children are a credit and an ornament to them. If, my friend, I had to begin life again, I would not be a successful and fashionable artist; better be a blacksmith. You say I must make a quiet tour on the Continent, but who have I to go with me? My wife has enough on her hands to take care of a house of sickly children; and to be plain with you, as I like to be, her company would be no acquisition to my peace.”

“I have spoken to your second sister, Agnes; she is unshackled and devoted to you. She, and that brave little nephew of yours, another Hugh Graff, the painter, if I mistake not.”

“Ah! do not say that! Better he should be a hangman. Well, will they go with me?”

“They will; and kind and affectionate companions, trust me, they will make. You must really quit all these disagreeables, get a mass of new thoughts into your head, and fresh air into your lungs; see novel sights; truly and really enjoy yourself, Hugh, and I promise you may come back again with a stamina repaired and strong enough to last for years.”

“Do you think so?”

“Such is our constant experience.”

“Then I might resume my brush again, and be president. Ah! if I could only die president—Sir Hugh and Lady Graff!”

“You would rather die a blacksmith,” said Oberon, smiling.

“Well—possibly, or—or a Christian, Oberon. No time shall be lost, however, my friend, in preparation. I must pass my pupils over to somebody else. Then, hey! for a life of idleness, and a stroll over France, Switzerland, and Italy!”

This being the final resolution, everything was put in motion and got ready for the change.

But before that event took place the studio in Welbeck-street was once more destined to a visit from Iris Spell. She no sooner heard of Hugh’s serious illness and intended departure from England, than she made up her mind to visit her old friend and bosom companion herself, see him alone, and ascertain from his own lips the cause of his malady. Could it be disappointed affection? Ah! she would console him. If from the coldness and indifference of his wife, she would undertake to see that wife, and endeavour to heal the difference. What would she not do? Who knows too that she might not discover some cure of her own, if she did but see him, for the very consumption with which they said he was wasting! Surely he might be fed, his sleep looked to, and one could insist that he gave himself proper recreation and exercise. She would take the whole matter into her own hands, and find out what could be done for him. She was his dearest friend, that she felt and knew; and if

anything happened to him she was certain it would be her death.

Big with these sentiments and affections, Iris took the first opportunity to call at the studio. She told no one her project; she never did when she had anything great and good to accomplish. Her name, as usual, passed her immediately into the painting-room; she there found the artist still at work finishing some necessary commissions, and putting the last touch to many a picture he had before considered perfect. He had begun to grow more fastidious and particular with his paintings of late. Even his mind had obtained a certain higher spiritualism not belonging to his nature, and looked out brilliantly and anxiously from his glittering eyes. Iris was painfully struck with the change in his appearance. She had not seen him for some three months before, but during that period his countenance and general contour, and even voice, were sensibly altered for the worse. There was a flush on his usually pale face, the mouth had become prominent and the cheeks sunken. He walked rather feebly, and spoke sometimes very faint, and with a hacking, dry cough, more than once interrupting his conversation. He wore the old quiet smile, and the same gentle voice greeted his visitor. But his eye had lost its calm depths and became peering and restless.

His joy at seeing Iris was visible. He turned very pale, and even trembled as she pressed his outstretched hand in hers, letting it rest there a moment.

"Indeed, Hugh, you are not well; I can see it all with my own eyes; but, my friend, you are not well. Never mind, we shall make you better. Is it anything that troubles you? Tell me, make a confidant of me!"

"I have a great many cares, you may well believe, Iris; but I do not think they have anything to do with my disease; that is constitutional."

"But—well, I was going to say something; but you ought to be most particular in taking nothing but the purest and most nutritious food. And do you sleep well, Hugh? you know I am now half a doctor."

"Not so well of late."

"Ah, I thought so. That ought to be looked to. And then, your dear paintings; but you are so wedded to them. It is a beautiful art."

"It is a vile trade, Iris, a vile trade, I tell you, as practised now. I have always worked at it as a trade; my uppermost thought to finish the job and make money. Nearly all the noblemen and others who give me commissions have themselves a strict eye to the marketable value of the article. Hence their large patronage. They attend our annual dinners; they recognise and praise us and our art, all to keep up the price of such an extensive family property. The few geniuses, as they are called, who work for real art, are either miserably poor amongst us, or but struggling men frequently harassed by debt."

"But surely, dear Hugh, there must be a great pleasure in seeing one's ideas grow out on canvas

before them. I have often heard Oberon say that the most exquisite pleasure of his life, next to his love for me, has been drawn from the consciousness that he was creating scenes, characters, and images."

"That may be, Iris. You speak of creating. Creating!—I do not know the thought ; all I have ever known or felt has not gone beyond my father's idea, to get the work out of hand and to get paid for it. Of course, there are some agreeables in the execution, but the meanest mechanic or servant, or executant of any kind, enjoys that."

"Just as the birds do in building their nests."

"Oh, no ; with a delight not half so intense. They have their affections, such as they are, bound up with their labour. I have never known that feeling—at least, since my very early days. I toiled for money and honour, and I suppose I have had my reward. But you are mistaken, dear Iris, if you think the execution of a painting must necessarily be a pleasure,—rather is it often a pain, a drudgery and a pain. What I am doing now is so, with some few exceptions. Remember, the thing is not like poetry, spontaneous ; it is a constant labour to produce effects with daubing colours—a tiring, harassing, and disheartening work that is."

"Enough, Hugh ; do not distress yourself. There, you must give over painting. I agree with Oberon. But you must not go to the Continent for all that. Why, you might die abroad ! Ah, no ; you must not go—indeed you must not. We will take care of you here. Come to us at Edelstone."

"I fear that must not be, Iris. There is one, remember, who can claim a right to take care of me. No matter! Destiny is a strange thing, dear Iris. I will act on the counsel of your husband, my dearest and best friend, next to yourself. I will leave my home—no great sorrow that—for a change. I will quit this scene of my successes and honours. I will go on the shelf, Iris. Ah! there indeed is infinite pain; but for many a day I have had no pleasure. Agnes, you know, and that fine little nephew of mine, George's son, Hugh—oh! there are so many Hughs in the family!—well, he is to go with us. We shall make an affectionate trio, Iris. That is what I want, Iris—affection—love!"

"What, and not a model?"

"No, not that now. I fear the pursuit of that once cost me what I never have had—a wife."

"It may be so, dear Hugh. But you forget that if you regarded the wife you hint at as a model, that wife might despise you or hate you. It would be terrible to have to bear the contempt and hatred of a true woman."

"Not worse than her indifference—not worse. But I have had my guerdon, I suppose. 'Tis all destiny!"

"No, Hugh, it is all selfishness. Believe me, it is the want of love which is the bane of the world. Why do I love Oberon? because I esteem him as the perfection of a noble disinterested nature and feeling. I do not think he ever in his life thought

of himself alone. He is too grand for selfishness of any kind. So there is a little lecture for you. I am glad I have seen you ; and you look better and feel better ; there now, don't you ?”

“ I should be always better—— Never mind, I was going to say something. But, dear Iris, I will write to Oberon and you constantly. I somehow think there is a kind of necessity in this journey. I am almost a fatalist. But see !” and the artist drew a cover from a picture on the easel, “ can you recognise that ? That is to be my very last work before I leave London—a simple story, Iris—a happy family.”

“ We—the Spells ?”

“ Dear Oberon and his wife, Iris, and his mother, and their noble, beautiful children. This is for him, Iris—for my friend.”

Iris burst into tears. She thought she could have commanded herself during the interview ; and for this, and to form her own opinion of Hugh's whole state, she indulged in a general conversation, but the sight of this work of affection, and the moving looks and feelings of the painter as he tremblingly uncovered it, overcame her as well as him. They both wept like children.

“ It is my best work, Iris. I know it is, for I found I had a heart and soul to cast into it. When these are cleared off—they will be so in a few days—and that finished—my painting is over. I go, dear Iris, but I know I shall never return.”

“ Oh ! do not say so. Oberon, who is seldom wrong, gives me good hopes. Come, look up and

dry your eyes, Hugh. This is weakness, and will never do." And she pressed her handkerchief against her own face.

"Iris, this is a very, very dreary moment for me. But we must part now; part—a hard word; but we must not meet again before I go."

"Perhaps it were better not. I know—that is, I suspect—what your pain must be; for we are sister and brother, Hugh. Good-bye, dear, dearest Hugh. God in his mercy bless and restore you to health and happiness."

The artist, raising his straining eyes to the beautiful face bent over him—for Iris was the taller of the two—looked a look of intense love and grief. Iris saw the look and the motion, and stooping, gave that dear companion of her childhood one fond kiss from her heart. Then rapidly turned away, dried her eyes, and had left the studio in a moment. Oberon himself would have approved of that innocent and childlike parting.

In a month from that date the studio in Welbeck-street was finally shut up, and Hugh Graff, his sister and nephew, with every appliance which wealth could procure and good advice suggest, were off *en route* for a lengthened tour on the Continent.

His departure under such distressing circumstances threw a deep gloom over the Spell family. The artist's last picture was conveyed to Oberon, with a letter which breathed nothing but tenderness and a regard for his continued welfare and happiness. It was a long epistle, and full of the

incidents of their early history, their love for one another, and the life-long advantages of the intellectual instruction he had received from his friend. The name of Iris was introduced only twice, and this casually, but still in a manner to show how completely she was one of the former band of happy children. Hugh himself expressed in this letter no hopes of his recovery. He quoted the following lines of Oberon with evident melancholy :

“ But, then, to die ; at one small jot of time
 To drop from life into the noisome grave ;
 The heart’s fond pulses stopt, the warm blood ice ;
 Voice, and the fascination of the eye,
 Feeling, rest, motion, sense,—a nullity ;
 A black pall drawn o’er mind and knowledge : grace,
 And the strong development of limb,
 Th’ electrical intelligence of form—
 Love’s nurture, chang’d to cold, damp loathsomeness ;
 The soul, first parted from her twin-born mate,
 A dreary wand’rer on that dark, vague shore,
 Which human science never charted—God !
 ’Tis shocking : nature shrinks, the heart recoils
 From such a change, from all we are,
 To all we know not of.”

“ Yet,” he said, “ although I did and do somewhat feel all this, I now believe that if the grim monster were to come upon me, I could meet him without a shudder. I seem to have nothing to live for. Caroline and the two Levers will take care of the children. As to art, I have done with it, and almost hate it. Oh ! did you but know the machinations and total want of independence even in that focus of self-seeking government—the corporation of the Academy—you would really blush for human

institutions. They are all imperfect, because they all want truthfulness, and are conducted on policy rather than right. But I admit I never have followed an art, but a trade. I fear I have set some members of my family crazy about painting. They too dream of a fortune. It may be, as you said, that I have been but laying a foundation, destined to be the first stone to be buried deep, in order to make firm a superstructure for others ; it may be one of my nephews who shall know true art and live for that alone, with all its sweet amenities of love and friendship, and not for money or mere tinsel honours. I have lived to discover the small account these hold in happiness."

In this and similar strains the artist showed his regret for his past life, and seemed to derive no single pleasure or gratification from the riches he had accumulated and the high position he had achieved. His letter, on the whole, was both instructive and suggestive. It conveyed the life-long experience and conclusions of a painter of our modern English school.

Oberon too plainly saw his wife's grief at the departure of her early friend, brother, or lover—whichever he may best be called. Her husband offered the most effective and genuine consolation by his own kindness, tenderness, and affection at this moment of intense trial to her feelings, and brought her gradually round to tranquillity again by heartily sympathizing with her sorrow. No such mean and petty passion as jealousy could ever creep into the breast of Oberon Spell.

CHAPTER XIV.

A WONDERFUL REVELATION.

BUT other and more lively cares soon occupied the attention of Iris. She had a long letter from her father : he was still in difficulties of one kind or other, and asked if Oberon could oblige him with the loan of a hundred pounds for a month or so ; he would be sure to return it, as he expected to be taken in as a partner in a flaming concern in the clock trade. “ But,” continued he, “ do you know, I have experienced a sad loss in the sudden and unexpected death of my friend, old Wilhelm Spell. He was full ninety-nine years of age, but every one here thought he would live to a hundred and ten at least. He was tough skinned, almost as brown and wrinkled as leather long worn, but for all this mummy appearance he was as active and healthy as a stripling. The doctors testified that his vitals were sound, and his mental faculties and conversation were as brilliant as my own. Ah ! my dears, I was a great favourite of his, as I am with everybody till I ask them for a loan ; and as he was enormously rich, I expected naturally a little show of friendship from him. In fact, to tell you the plain truth, I was about to negotiate a loan of a thousand from him, in order to enter with *éclat* on my new speculation as a clock-maker. But

Providence willed otherwise. The old man died one night in his bed, having gone off apparently without a struggle. Barring his somewhat tanned skin, which had an old-world appearance, I never saw a face in death so calm, dignified, and noble. And do you know, dear Oberon, I could fancy him a touch like you, making of course every allowance for the great difference in years; he certainly must have been strikingly so in his youth, and he had all the remains of a very handsome man. He was a German, but spoke English as well as myself.

“The chief purpose of this letter—although I hope, dears, the small loan will not be forgotten—is to place before you certain extraordinary facts for your knowledge and consideration. It is only to be regretted that the narrator’s life was not spared till he made a full disclosure; but such as it is, and coupled with your mother, Dove’s, more wonderful revelation, the information is well worth your most serious and anxious attention.

“Perhaps you don’t know anything of the history of the Wildermere family. Your mother, Dove, however, does, and that with a singular tenacity of memory. Her grandfather was house-steward, or major-domo, in the mansion of the fourth earl; and her grandmother, housekeeper. Now you must know, as I will tell you in full by and by, the earl in his latter days became mad, and her grandfather and grandmother, with two deaf and dumb attendants obtained from abroad, were the only persons allowed to be near him. He babbled a great deal, and it was not thought convenient to suffer his secrets

to be divulged to the world. Your mother, Dove, was then a very young child. She was the pet of the old people, and permitted to be in the house with them, as incapable of understanding what she heard. But little pitchers have great ears, and she pretty well divined all that dropped from the mad earl in his ravings and calmer moments. The matters revealed were forbidden subjects — never spoken of, but she stored them in her memory as so many obscure family stories ; and when she heard old Wilhelm Spell's strange tale, I thought that she herself had run crazy, she was so full of moody ponderings and mutterings. Now I must inform you of what my aged friend, Wilhelm, said. Well, he assured me that his only sister, Margherita, was married privately in France to an Earl of Wildermere, and that he was a witness to the marriage, but that not long after her husband, getting jealous of her—for she was considered to be a great beauty in her time—began to use her unkindly, and ended by deserting her, or rather, she deserted him, for she neither liked him nor his ways. She soon gave birth to a description of posthumous son, which is the whole gist of the matter. You will bear in mind that I am only telling old Wilhelm's story ; but I believe him. Although the Spells were highly respectable people, merchants, Wilhelm never approved of this unequal marriage with the earl ; but when he found that they would have one another, he was present at the ceremony for prudential reasons. When his sister had made herself free, he caused her to go back to her maiden name, which

indeed had never been publicly altered by the marriage, and her child was born and baptized a Spell—Heinrich Spell. Fix that in your mind, Oberon. The story told people was this: that she had contracted a stolen marriage with a cousin of hers, another Spell, but that he died soon after the union. Heinrich, always in ignorance of his real birth, was educated partly in Germany, partly in America, and settled finally in England after his mother had paid the debt of nature at a rather early age. His uncle Wilhelm—my old Wilhelm—had quitted long ago for India, and was entirely lost to his sister and nephew. Now, the Christian name of young Spell, as we will call him, was Heinrich, as I said, and your grandfather, you know, dear Oberon, was Heinrich Spell, of the same calling too, a merchant. I was only too glad to tell old Wilhelm that I knew a gentleman at home in England, my own son-in-law, who was the grandson of Heinrich Spell, a London merchant. In answer to me, and after some consideration, he said there might be something in it, and that if you could be proved to be his great-nephew, he would leave you his entire fortune, if not the whole would go to public charities in America and Germany. I took care not to mention your aunt Lever, because I did not think her conduct towards Iris and you proper and handsome; so you see, ill deeds are always ill-bestowed, and the contrary. Had Frederica done the right thing, she might have had a friend here over the Atlantic. The old man was to have communicated to me many particulars besides, but when

I called anxiously enough the next day, he was a corpse, having dropped off, as I said, quite suddenly. All his papers, as he had no relations here, are now in the hands of the authorities. My advice, beloved children, is that you go to Scriven at once—he is a very shrewd, sensible fellow—and place the whole matter, so far as I communicate it to you, in his hands; he will sift it to the bottom. I think, Oberon, you ought to see your mother without loss of time, and Mrs. Lever might be of use, if you are friends, in adding some particulars to clear up this mystery, so interesting and important to all of us. I only trust it will turn out true for your dear sakes. Perhaps Hilary Dove too may come in for a slice of the good fortune; and I do believe if the old gentleman had left a will—and I think he has not—he would have bequeathed me something handsome. I assure you I should have received his legacy with unspeakable pleasure and gratitude, duly mourning the worthy testator's death, as a matter of course. Had I been thus fortunate, I should have retired from business; not that the clock-making prospect is not brilliant, it is truly so, offering in fact a rapid fortune to such energy as mine. But for the present I should prefer the *otium cum* as more suitable to my time of life. I own I feel disappointed, but I rely on your well known punctuality, dear Oberon, and the prompt love of Iris, for that small, but crowning, loan. It will set me up for life, and I hope to live to repay you, my dear children, out of the clock-making a hundredfold. It is a wonderful trade, you can multiply

the works *ad libitum* at scarcely any cost ; and as to their going, we make them for exportation, and so long as they *go* out of our factory, that will be enough for us. They have a pretty face, and Iris will tell you how far that *goes* in this seeming world.

“ But pray lose no time in hunting up the splendid treasures I have opened up before you. Your mother, Dove” (we should have mentioned that the quiet Keziah had joined her husband some twelve months after his departure for America)—“ your mother, Dove, says that if you are the great-grandson of Margherita Spell, you are the real Earl Wildermere, and that the title and estates of Erlam Court and Blackmines, as well as the Priory—hear that, my boy—fall to you. She knows all about it now that the clue is given her. She is not very communicative, as you know ; but what I could glean from her amounts to this :—Geoffrey, fourth Earl of Wildermere—she had it from his own lips when he was mad—married a very beautiful woman privately abroad. He always called her Margherita, and your mother had never heard any other name till old Wilhelm revealed it as Spell—Margherita Spell. You will note how this memory of your mother’s chimes in with the aged merchant’s story. But I will go on with her part of it. She says that the earl, though insane, spoke sometimes as calm and sensibly as other people ; but he liked to disburden himself to his two confidants, your mother’s grandfather and grandmother. Well, his story went on thus :—Thinking his wife was dead, and knowing

nothing of the son and heir born to him, he married again, and with great grandeur and ceremony, in England, the Duke of Middlesex's only daughter, another celebrated beauty. By this lady he had two children—the Lady Alice and the Lady Bertha Maltravers. The tale went on to say that the former was engaged to be married to the Marquis of Lorndale and the latter to Sir Roger Wheatley, when an anonymous letter reached the earl, informing him of the existence of his first wife, Margherita, and more important still, of the existence of his son and real heir. The nature of the information, from the particulars stated, could not well be doubted. But the earl at the time was equal to the guilt and peril of his position. The Duke of Middlesex, his father-in-law, was still living. His Countess, Adeliza, was the mother of his daughters, affianced to two distinguished Cabinet ministers. He now knew that these children were both illegitimate, their mother no wife, and he himself a bigamist, under circumstances of cruel neglect of his lawful wife and of his son and real heir. What could he do? The whole matter was kept a profound secret. He had powerful friends and kinsmen all around him. He caused his eldest daughter to be created Countess Summers in her own right, with patent of transmission to her eldest son. He intended also to procure a similar hereditary honour for his second daughter, Bertha, but somehow he could not effect his purpose. His object was to ennoble his two illegitimate children, thus giving them absolute rank and title in themselves, irre-

spective of their birth. His wife, Lady Adeliza, had vast estates of her own by settlement, which she was to convey to her daughters at their marriage. But not satisfied with this, and in the face of the information which had privately reached him, the earl settled the Blackmines and Erlam Court property on the Countess Summers, and the Edelstone property on Lady Bertha, as if there was no male heir to inherit them after his demise. I should have mentioned that the Marquis of Lorn-dale when he married the Countess Summers was a widower, having an only son, then a child, the Earl of Landon, afterwards our minister-plenipotentiary at the Court of Russia. Both the marriages took place with extraordinary *éclat* and splendour, and the whole secret of the illegitimacy and bigamy was locked up in the earl's guilty and troubled breast. His countess—that is, his supposed wife—died not long after the union of her daughters. Her father, the duke, soon followed his only child. Thus two sources of his most anxious uneasiness were removed by death. But it happened that by some extraordinary disclosure, the nature of which your mother could never learn, the Marquis of Lorndale got acquainted with the dreadful story. He was a silent and prudent man. His interest and that of his son by his second marriage, Earl Summers, was deeply concerned in keeping every particular known of the guilty tale a secret; still he thought it necessary to make inquiries of his father-in-law, the now aged Earl Wildermere, and as concealment could not be maintained between them, the entire

melancholy and disastrous history was told. Beyond the two the secret did not at that time go. Sir Roger Wheatley was kept in utter ignorance of his lady's spurious birth and the unreal nature of his own claim to the Priory—the dowry she had brought to him in marriage, the other property left to her by her mother going to herself by settlement. Time wore on. The old Earl of Wildermere began to be morose and moody. He set out on a sudden for the Continent. With strange pertinacity he commenced and continued a most vigorous but cautious search for his lost wife and son. He collected and revived memorials of them; but his investigation bore no fruitful result. Margherita was dead, and his son and her son—his only legitimate child—was lost to him for ever. This and a heavy sense of his guilt drove him mad. On his return, by the advice of the Marquis of Lorndale, he was placed under the care of your mother, Dove's grandfather and grandmother, as I have mentioned; and it was while he was with them that your mother learnt the several particulars of the story, a forbidden subject and memory, mind, to her, and one in which she was told no faith was to be placed, as it was the tale of a madman. Your mother only half and dimly believed it. The whole was buried in her secret breast; and when the earl shot himself, as he did afterwards, having somehow got hold of a pistol, there was a horror and mystery spread over the story which made it almost a crime to refer to it or even to think of it, and so it lay for long years lost in the distance.

But when she heard that Margherita Spell was the name of Earl Wildermere's wife, as she did from my lips, I shall never forget her hums and haws, and the hints and the strange efforts she made at disclosure. At last, by drawing her out and the most skilful management, I had the entire revelation from her as I have delivered it to you. Ah! if it were only all proven, as well as true, and fairly out of the hands of the lawyers, how I should bless heaven. But it is a long time to wait. Meantime, dear children, you will not forget that little loan; it is really of great importance to us all, as it will place me in a foremost position. Kiss my pets around for me. My respects to your mother, Oberon, and to Dr. Trensham—who is well out of the Hygienic humbug. Note my present address, for fear of any miscarriage—41, Ninety-street, New York—not a very grand quarter, but stirring, sir, stirring, quite alive with business! Write direct to me to the above address. The delay of a day may cost me the loss of the clockmaking partnership—the most brilliant prospect that ever opened on a man of my genius and energy.

“My dear, dear children,

“From your very affectionate father,

“To Oberon and Iris Spell.”

“HILARY DOVE.

Here was a letter to plunge Oberon and Iris into a sea of thought and speculation—to overwhelm them with grand expectations. Iris, in particular, was exultant. She flung her arms around her husband's neck, and exclaimed, passionately—

“Earl Wildermere, Earl Wildermere, Lord of Erlam Court, Blackmines, and the Priory, I congratulate you—your wife is the first to congratulate you. Oh! I believe in destiny. Nature never belies herself. I am sure of the truth of all we have heard, as I am that you are here now. My brave, my noble husband, you will be rewarded for many a day’s hard trial.”

“But, my dear Iris, there are many things to clear up yet, though I own I am sanguine of success. You remember the old trunk, dear, I rescued from the fire. I rummaged that over some time after, and found it contained letters from my grandfather, Heinrich, and, better news still, from the very Wilhelm Spell in question. But I have the originals. They shall all be handed over to Scrivens, and submitted to a regular German interpreter to translate. And we must look up the old housekeeper of my grandfather in the city. I called some years ago at 39, Broad-street, where his offices had been, but the aged woman had long left there. However, the person I spoke to thought she or her daughter could be found, if still living. We shall try what an advertisement will do. This affair of the claim divides itself into two branches. My first attempt must be to prove myself the grandnephew of Wilhelm Spell, in order to inherit his property as next of kin; and that settled, I shall, I hope, be enabled to prove my title to the English estates, and to the lordly distinction which goes with them. I shall write to the General Count

Spell I formerly spoke to you of, and try if he can any way assist me in my search. I truly believe he is a relation of mine. But now let us kneel down, my love, and ask the counsel, blessing, and direction of Heaven, and grace to use any trust the Almighty may bestow on us to His service, and for the good of our fellow-creatures."

Husband and wife bent the knee humbly before their Creator and Redeemer, and implored the Divine guidance and assistance of the Holy Spirit in this great trial of their moderation and charity, and in obtaining and applying the proofs necessary to sustain their rightful cause and inheritance. This done, they arose and tenderly embraced each other.

"Iris," said Oberon, "I leave this business principally to you and the lawyers—I must not neglect my patients. You know how they absorb my thoughts, my studies, and time. Many lives, and the relief of much pain, now rest, under Heaven, with me. Do you act from your best judgment, my love. This will prepare you for a lofty position," added he, smiling.

"And I feel now the future in the instant!" said Iris, reciprocating the smile. "You shall see how naturally and easily the countess will sit on the once girlish hoyden, 'but'—I declare I was going to give you Mrs. Glass's advice. No, I will not spoil the contemplation of our prospects by a musty proverb."

Iris soon set about the grand labour assigned her with calm, but determined energy. To Mr.

Scrivens, who was on the spot near her, she confided, as Oberon had directed, that part of the investigation which had immediate reference to the American property; while to Mr. Ponder she entrusted the far more difficult task of proving the marriage of Margherita Spell with the fourth Earl of Wildermere, and that Heinrich Spell was their child. This of course involved a claim to the title and the English property—an all-important inquiry. The papers in the old trunk were very carefully examined and accurately translated. They proved to be, on the whole, a voluminous correspondence between Wilhelm and Heinrich Spell; also some letters from Bertram, Oberon's father, and Frederica (Mrs. Lever), his aunt, and one precious fragment of a letter from Margherita, the sister of Wilhelm, and Oberon's paternal grandmother, and bearing her signature. The next step was to advertise for Mrs. Jane Watkins and her daughter Sarah, who had formerly been the laundress at 39, Old Broadstreet, when offices were kept there by Mr. Heinrich Spell, merchant. After repeated announcements in the leading metropolitan and some of the principal provincial journals, this inquiry met with no response; and it was concluded that the elder of the two females was dead, and that her daughter had left the country. This was a great gap in the chain of evidence; but as it could not be mended, it had to be borne without relaxing other efforts. Fortified by the proofs in hand duly attested, Mr. Scrivens sent his chief clerk to New York, and there the whole matter of Oberon's claim to the

American property was gone into as exhaustively as possible. In present default of an heir, the authorities had the late Wilhelm Spell's property and papers in hand. Among them fortunately was discovered a will, made the very day before his death. By this, he left the whole of his property, with the exception of a few legacies, to Dr. Oberon Spell, of Edelstone, England; naming his heir in this special manner, provided he could prove himself to be the great-nephew of him, the testator. If this should not be satisfactorily determined, the entire property, with the exceptions mentioned, was to be divided according to a disposition he made between the charitable institutions of New York and Vienna, whence it appeared the family of the Spells derived their origin. In any case, Hilary Dove was to take a thousand pounds legacy, for various acts of civility, kindness, and attention to the testator, and for the fund of pleasure and amusement he had afforded him in recounting his adventures on many a dreary winter's evening over warm whisky toddy; but more especially did he thus distinguish this agreeable gentleman, because he believed him to be the father-in-law of his dear grand-nephew, Oberon Spell. Thus far the will was clear and satisfactory enough. And on comparing the letters and other documents produced from the trunk, with the undoubted handwriting of Wilhelm Spell in the masses of papers he left behind him in his library, the claim of Oberon Spell, as the lawful heir to his property, was thoroughly established, and, after the necessary forms had been

all complied with, legally admitted. Mr. Scrivens' chief clerk upon this lost no time in returning to England from an entirely successful mission. Encouraged by an immediate grant of 200*l.* from Oberon, through Mr. Scrivens' clerk, and by the thousand pounds which he had just touched as the legacy, Hilary Dove was once more triumphantly at his ease and happy. He therefore hastened to adopt his wife's advice, to get back home as soon as possible, take her with him, and make himself useful in assisting his children in the assertion of their rightful claims against a legion of enemies, legal cavils, and defects of evidence. Accordingly, he set sail with Mr. Scrivens' clerk, his quiet, unobtrusive wife accompanying him. Hilary Dove declared that he felt a pang at abandoning the great scheme of supplying the world with clocks, whose wheels were to be made of cork, whose spring, where one was used, was to be a slip of whalebone, and whose pendulum was to be iron and flint stones—each and all quite original. He was grieved, he said, at forfeiting such high prospects, but the call of duty and affection was irresistible, and would rouse into operation all his undoubted energy and the recent special knowledge supplied him, in order to make his son-in-law an earl, his daughter a countess, and both millionaires, thus raising himself for ever, he hoped, above struggle and misfortune.

The sum willed to Oberon Spell by his great uncle, when all expenses were paid, amounted to 180,000*l.*, and the whole was ultimately transferred

to English securities. Oberon still continued to pursue his career as a doctor. He knew how much relief and consolation he could bring to others, and he would not then for worlds desist from his work of healing the sick and comforting the afflicted. Since the departure of the Countess Summers, Catherine Flowers, still a spinster, generally shared his labours in succouring the invalid poor. She had formerly admired him, now she adored him; and next to discharging the holy offices of Christian charity enjoined by a Higher Power, she deemed it a sacred duty to fulfil the directions and follow also in the footsteps of Oberon Spell, the companion and early love of her childhood.

Mr. Scrivens had thus successfully pursued his part of the inquiry, the more abstruse point remained, of establishing the proofs of Oberon Spell's claim to the peerage. This was hemmed-in by great difficulties. The information given by old Wilhelm to Hilary Dove on the point was very meagre, and required corroboration in every particular. Where did the marriage take place? and were there any existing documents to prove that not only it was solemnized, but that Heinrich Spell was the true fruit of the union? He had been described as a posthumous child, and it was stated by Wilhelm that he (Heinrich) believed himself to be the son of a deceased German merchant. Accordingly it would be useless relying on the old man's papers, which would naturally support, and did actually support, the fiction throughout. These,

however, were guarded most carefully, and the whole matter of the claim, surrounded as it was by the most formidable difficulties, was very properly kept a profound secret. Iris, nevertheless, did not despair of seeing Oberon become Earl Wildermere one day; for herself she did not care—such was her language—but if Providence willed it so, she would like to be a countess. And with this spontaneous inspiration she now joined a tag to her daily prayers, asking Heaven to reveal the truth and bestow the right on the lawful inheritor.

We only record the fact, we do not lend our approval to this very general kind of piety. Certain it is that this part of the fervent wife's prayers was delivered with unusual earnestness and devotion. She was not wanting in what she considered ardent co-operation; she made Oberon write to Count Spell, in Vienna. That haughty personage, who had been lately created a field-marshal, did not even deign a reply, and when stirred by the Austrian embassy, he disowned all knowledge of the family or circumstances, and stated that no member of his race had ever been traders or merchants, though it really happened that the great man was sprung from another and an inferior branch of the very family he affected to ignore and despise. This, perhaps, was the true reason why he did not like to stir-up ugly memories; and moreover he believed that Oberon Spell's claim was only a myth, wholly unfounded.

Foiled in this direction, Iris was not baffled. Her great oracle was her own mother, and with her she would spend hours in talking over the whole story.

On one of these occasions the silent woman, like a sybil suddenly aroused, exclaimed—

“But the brooch!”

“Ah! the brooch; what of that, dear mother?”

“Well, the miniature is that of the lost lady!”

“And was she so beautiful? I now see why you always wished that we should possess that brooch, for which we both have suffered so much. You did not know it was the likeness of Oberon’s great grandmother?”

“No.”

“But why did you covet it, dear mother?”

“That rests in my own bosom.”

“You did not know it was the likeness of Margherita Spell?”

“No; but of the lost lady. And it ought not to belong to the Wheatleys, who were no friends to my grandfather and grandmother. They said we had too much power over the mad earl, from whom they were as much as possible excluded.”

“Well, do you know, mother, I often thought that this miniature bore a strong resemblance to our Constance, and I have pleased myself with comparing faces.”

“Don’t believe, Iris, that the dead are for ever dead. They rise again, and walk our households. Constance is Margherita Spell, with her blood a little dashed by the Dove likeness. I have spoken more than I have for many a day, Iris; but ’tis only recent events have given me the clue, and made me feel an interest in the matter; and besides I know I did Oberon some injustice long ago. I

preferred another for your husband ; but you chose the right man. God bless you both. I hope I shall live to see him Earl Wildermere yet."

" Oh ! mother, I will treasure my brooch as a jewel of inestimable value, and I will love Constance for her resemblance to the lost lady. To think that I should have it from the hands of the Countess Summers herself. Is not this wonderful ?"

Mrs. Dove was silent ; she had already gone far beyond her tether, and was resolved to utter no word more without strict occasion.

The new information which Iris could give Mr. Ponder was really of not much value in itself at present ; but it might establish certain important points, and was quite in the track of discovery. One great necessity was to fix the dates ; and these, by a little close attention, inquiry, and collation, were put together very accurately. It would of course, he thought, be quite useless to sound the Marquis of Lornedale on the matter. He was every way interested in maintaining silence. Mr. Ponder knew this, but he also knew of the great chancery suit pending between Earl Summers and Jonathan Cubborn ; and should this turn out unfavourable to the earl, he resolved to make no scruple of communicating the information he now possessed to the marquis, and the conclusions he had arrived at, in order, if possible, to defeat Cubborn's claim, and then effect some fair compromise about the property. An arrangement might be made, in regard to the estates, to induce the hoary old nobleman to divulge what he knew of the real facts of Earl

Wildermere's first marriage. But the suit lingered on in chancery, and the distant expectation of a revelation through the Marquis of Lorndale seemed every month more hopeless. Meantime other events intervened, which for the time banished all thoughts of the peerage in the home of Oberon Spell, and only left the matter to the quiet and regular, but persevering efforts and pursuit of Mr. Ponder.

CHAPTER XV.

HUGH GRAFF CHANGES HIS RELIGION AND DIES.

URING the absence of Hugh Graff on the continent he never failed to write once a week to his now perfect friend, Oberon Spell. Iris was generally the first to open these letters, as husband and wife had scarcely a secret from one another beyond, as a matter of duty, those professional confidences which the doctor will ever consider most sacred. The Royal Academician had grown above his own family, and deputed his nephew or sister to convey from time to time his wishes, or rather commands, to them. To his wife his letters were infrequent and irregular, and were never outspokening, confidential, and cordial. The writer was always at a loss for something to say, finished abruptly, promising a long and full epistle the next time, and when the next time came the brevity was renewed and the promise forgotten. This kind of neglect and oblivion appeared not to be much regretted by his wife or people-in-law. The marriage originally was a mistake, and after circumstances did not tend to mend them.

Hugh, in his correspondence with Oberon, was not as successful in depicting natural scenery and graphic incidents as one might well expect from his artistic profession. He was left-handed and awk-

ward without his pencil and colours, and quite a foreigner and alien in the descriptions of language. However, he did sometimes attempt to pourtray a passing view or striking occurrence; but he was lost for association. There was a dryness and meagreness in his treatment; the hard outline was present, nothing beyond; the bold and felicitous filling-in was wanting, and even the sketch was often weak, indistinct, and broken, leaving but a confused and imperfect idea of the scene or meaning intended. He was more at home in talking about himself. His health had greatly improved; his cough had almost vanished; he was getting plump and round again, much, as he said, to his own discomfort and inconvenience. His spirits too were better, and he took a lively interest in many of the scenes and events passing around him. But what struck Oberon most in these letters was the continual recurrence of thoughts upon religion. Hugh was a good Protestant, as matters go; that is, he hated Popery without knowing anything about it beyond the gunpowder-plot and the fires in Smithfield. He went to church when he could or must go for appearances. But for the most part he spent the Sabbath at work in his studio, so severe was the public task put upon him by multiplied commissions. His notions of creed were very confused and limited; but whatever his belief was, it was bound up with the Church of England. The Prayer Book or Bible, 'tis true, were very seldom in his hands, and when they were they were regarded as merely dumb idols; but he had reminiscences of his Catechism, and

understood the routine of Church service. How was he astonished when he began to think seriously of the matter, that whole nations practising this abominable Popery could be moral and civil, just as good, in fact, as other people at home, and sometimes far better. Of course he knew a great deal about popes, priests, monks, and nuns, and similar Romanist subjects for pictures, but he had always associated the grossest indecencies with these as the result of their belief. The French in particular, and papists everywhere, he was taught to regard as degraded beings, quite inferior to his own countrymen in morality and religious observances. When actually in France, however, and somewhat accustomed to the ways of the people, he began to perceive that morality and piety were possible out of England and out of the pale of the Protestant church. The result was that about this time his letters were sprinkled with frequent doubts of the real truth of any religion. "You may be sure, Oberon, they are all delusions to please people till they learn to know better. 'Tis true, when they know more they will be deprived of many a delightful hope and foud desire; they will be let into the secret of the pigments of the picture, or like you and I, cloud-gazing long ago in Edelstone—dear Edelstone—find 'tis all smoke and vapour'—those gorgeous sunset effects—evanescences of the time, produced only to disappear. Ah! what a gloomy, dismal night follows! I wish I had my old Church belief fast again." These, and similar dreary ideas and speculations, Oberon took some pains to eradicate. His argu-

ments, spread over some months' correspondence, appeared to have much weight, and to produce a marvellous change in the painter's religious convictions. In truth, such was their effect, but in a far different direction from that contemplated by the Christian teacher. His correspondent now began to introduce into his letters exceptional and often irrelevant eulogiums on the Roman Catholic cathedrals and the grandeur and impressiveness of the services. He seemed to have got rid of his notion of "delusions" altogether. Oberon and Iris had dispelled these. But Hugh, making use of the religious objects presented to him, went into the opposite extreme; and his sister Agnes and his nephew, who wrote from time to time, were quite enchanted, not only with the ceremonies but the doctrines of the new or rather the old religion. Hugh Graff, in short, from an infidel and indifferentist turn, took to fervent believingness and piety. He became quite a zealot in his faith in all the Christian mysteries, and he ended a long series of professions and effusions of this kind by announcing that his sister, his nephew, and himself had become converts to the Roman Catholic religion. He was unnecessarily loud and prolix in his laudations of his new faith. He professed himself quite ready to be a martyr or a sufferer to any extent in vindicating his opinions, and not satisfied with this, he thrust a whole volume of theological arguments, derived from controversial works, into the body of his now long letters, endeavouring to wean, or rather compel his two dear friends to join him

in returning to the faith of their English forefathers.

These remarkable letters produced a certain effect on the practical mind of Iris. Her thoughts were almost wholly absorbed in the grand pursuit of the more earthly object of seeking evidence to support and confirm her husband's rights to a peerage and large property; and she believed she saw in Hugh Graff's change of religion an aid to her exertions in that rightful and honourable course.

"I think, my dear," said she one day to Oberon, "we should take advantage of this novel incident in the life of Hugh. He must now, as a matter of course, have considerable facilities in entering the houses of the priests and conversing with them. I do not see why we should not turn all this to account. He might be of service in clearing up the mystery of the marriage of your great-grandmother with the Earl of Wildermere. My principle is that opportunities are constantly placed in our way, but we should seize them and make use of them. There is no doubt that the marriage took place in a Roman Catholic church somewhere in France."

"A rather wide range for inquiry," said Oberon, smiling, "about an event which occurred so long ago."

"Ah! the Roman Catholic Church is so well organised, I understand, that the priests can all act as one body; and it would be only for the Pope to issue his mandate that all the French registries should be searched—having a strict regard to the

probability of the date—in order to procure the necessary intelligence. There, what do you think of that, dear?”

“A brilliant idea, my countess in expectancy, only that the Pope and College of Cardinals are very difficult to be moved in such small matters; and for an individual so unimportant as our friend, Hugh Graff, I fear you would have for a reply ‘*non possumus.*’”

“I do not know that. It is the practice of that Church to make mountains of their converts, to set them on high, to uncover them to the day, and let the whole world gaze at them. You see how Hugh already speaks of princes, bishops, and cardinals as his intimate friends and companions; and what is more, Agnes and little Hugh write in the same high strain also. A man of Graff’s pretensions at home in England, and of his good introductions abroad, could do much at the Court of Rome.”

“One thing he might do, certainly. He could inquire as he went on. He is travelling everywhere; no doubt his will be a long tour, if not cut fatally short by some act of negligence or over exertion. But as he journeys about among the churches and chapels, his delight, he might induce one of the inferior officers, with the priest’s sanction, to examine the registers. We have only to give the particulars. You can write them out to-day, and we will enclose them, communicating the matter in confidence to Hugh, as one which must not be disclosed before irrefragable proofs of the justice of my claim are actually in my hand.

The grander project you suggest might also be mooted ; but I fear a prudent and cautious body like the Sacred College would not meddle with it ; and we ourselves, love, must act with reticence and discretion. It will not be necessary either to inform Hugh at present of the immediate object of our search. It will be enough that he learn the inquiry is for the record of the marriage of my great-grandmother with the Earl of Wildermere. This will be stimulus sufficient for Hugh. We of course pay all the expenses."

Thus instructed, Iris herself undertook, as she often had to do, to write to her friend and brother, Hugh Graff ; and she did not fail to communicate every attainable particular, only suppressing the immediate objects of the inquiry. No sooner did the artist receive this commission of affection, than he set about the task confided to him with his customary perseverance and zeal. To visit every church and chapel in France, then return to England for a while and renew the investigation in other countries if necessary, going on till he succeeded, seemed no Herculean feat to the invalid. He had been accustomed to labour all his life, and this search would only amuse him. His sketching and painting—for he had again taken to work on a small and portable scale—could still continue, and one occupation would diversify and lighten the other. Such were Hugh's benevolent and brotherly intentions. He proceeded, too, to give them steady effect, and had already instituted many inquiries, but all to no purpose. He had at length passed some six months

between these researches and the works of art which were rapidly growing on his hands, and which he forwarded at regular intervals to England, when he found the winter close in upon him rather severely and early, it being as yet only the month of November; this too, just as he had taken up what he considered pleasant quarters in the small but picturesque village of Beauregard, in Brittany, and in the very same house where Oberon had stayed when on his travels so many years before. Père de Foix and his sister were still living, and cordially welcomed the celebrated painter and convert, Hugh Graff, the friend of Oberon Spell, whom they both well and favourably remembered. We need not say how interesting every spot of the ground where he stood would have been to the artist, had he only had health to enjoy the scenery through the snow and frost. But as it was, he had ventured too far; he had on more than one occasion, in his pursuit of some favourite sketch, violated the strict and almost sacred injunctions of his kind physician, Oberon Spell.

It was in this small house, situated in what was then considered a more remote part of France than it is now, that Hugh Graff laid himself down to die. He had caught a violent cold, which produced inflammation of the lungs, whilst engaged in sketching one of those interesting and picturesque chapels to the Virgin, with the surrounding scenery, which here and there arrest the attention of the traveller in Brittany. This attack was the last of many. His fate was now consummated. He knew

from all he had expected and been told, that when an event like this occurred, his hour was come. He had in his way grown happy in the practice of his new religion. He had almost begun to forget home, the ties of blood, and even of friendship, in his blind zeal for the Church of his enthusiastic belief. His faith had supplied his genius with what nature had denied him—inspiration. Many of his recent pictures—all holy themes—and some of his latest sketches, breathe the purest poetic feeling, so much wanting in all the efforts of his former career. In the end then, Hugh Graff had become reconciled to his art. He had learnt to make it a work of homage and prayer—a hymn of devotion—a sacred poem. No wonder then that he should have begun to be really contented and happy. His sister and nephew, too, were exemplars of piety, and the three constantly dwelling among churches and their ministers—often simple and Christian men in the best sense of the term—acquired a habit of mind and feeling which seemed to be imbued with, and formed of piety and faith. Hugh had made his will long ago. His pictures and all the proceeds of his studio were to be publicly sold—a fourth was to go as a gift to the Royal Academy, the remainder to be divided between his sister Agnes and his nephew, Hugh William. His large funded property he willed to his wife absolutely, for the benefit of his children, leaving the disposition to her judgment and justice after securing to herself an adequate income, taking care also that every member of his own family should obtain either a legacy, or

annuity, or both. This swallowed up no small amount of money. To his friends, Oberon Spell and Iris, he left by codicil some gems of art, he had executed in France, and a few rare and exquisite purchases. He had become aware of their ample accession of riches, and did not attempt to bequeath them anything in the form of a pecuniary legacy. His end was not without pain, but it was happy. He was totally absorbed and lost, and died away in charity, faith, and hope, with the crucifix grasped firmly in his hand even in his last agony. True, he was far from those he ought to love best; but these had ceased to be a care or anxiety to him; and he had now a new home and a new kingdom, which, stretching his pious enthusiasm perhaps too far, he had sought to the almost utter oblivion of every mortal tie or earthly consideration. Thus passed Hugh Graff from this world in his thirty-seventh year—a remarkable man, who had achieved wonders by the force of tact and sheer labour, and who only caught the true feeling and inspiration of an artist within the last few months of his life, evidencing in himself the eternal connexion between art and religion.

CHAPTER XVI.

OBERON FALLS SICK—IRIS BECOMES HIS DOCTOR.

HE death of Hugh Graff cast an awful gloom over the house of Oberon Spell. The doctor had for years walked among the shadows of mortality, and had grown used to the cold silence of the tomb. Friends of some kind or other were continually dropping away, even under his own eye and care disappearing in the grave. But here was a death blended with his own life's history, and it gave him a shock and a pause which no ordinary departure could have effected. But the calls and anxieties of the profession he had adopted allowed him little time for sorrow. He was too busy about saving the lives of the living to bestow much thought even on the beloved dead.

But the grief of Iris was altogether inconsolable. She loved Hugh more as a mother—strange to say—than as a sister. Certainly she had never regarded him as a mere friend. Hers had been always a feeling of protection towards him. She knew his defects; she saw he was of a paltry heart; but this was his weakness; and he had grown up by her side and into greatness much by the aid of this his small tact, and yielding and suave manners. But then he was her Hugh. He had painted her

often—too often indeed for the reputation of his pictures—for in them she appeared in every form and likeness. But this was an early homage paid to the woman who had wound herself around the fibres of his heart and rooted herself into the core of his existence. The love of Iris for Oberon was for a superior. She felt somewhat in awe of him; there was a point in him which her bold nature could not pass beyond. But with Hugh she could do anything and everything, and had no kind of diffidence or fear. She could have boxed his ears or kissed him as readily as she would her own brother, had she owned such a relation. His death made a hollow in her bosom. She wept till no tears seemed to be left her. They dried hard on her face and on her brain, and like a child, she would fall asleep crying. But she only awoke again to sorrow, and went about the house as one distraught. It was in vain that her husband attempted to console her. She blamed him much for sending that poor, feeble frame away from his own country, and more herself for suggesting those curious walks into strange places, to search out the means of gratifying her vanity, casting him, as it were, into the very house of death prepared for him by the previous visit of Oberon—a house and a spot which they both had recommended.

“But,” said Oberon one day, catching her in the midst of an immoderate fit of grief over a miniature of Hugh’s which she held in her hand, “you have duties to perform, Iris—duties to me your

husband ; to those your children living near and around you. What with my cares here and public cares, and those teasing inquiries, which are more a torment than anything else, I begin to find myself rather broken down and weary."

Iris dried her eyes, and took a long, fixed, and searching look at her husband.

"Oh ! my God ! my God ! how are you altered, Oberon ! Monster that I am, not to see that you are dying. But no ! you only require a little of my care, dear ; you have been so much neglected. Trensham perhaps, or Atomcraft, or some of them, will make your calls to-day. My husband, indeed you do look weary."

"It will pass away, Iris dear ; but I own I do not feel very well. I will return early ; there are some cases of life and death in my hands to-day, it would not be right to neglect them. I will return early, my love."

He did return sooner than usual, but it was with the premonitory symptoms of fever upon him ; he knew the awful signs—he felt the black death coming with his ugliest and most rapid stride, and he immediately gave such directions as he considered not only necessary to save his own life, if that were possible, but the lives of those dear to him, and ordered a detached cottage in the outskirts of Edelstone, which fortunately was to let, to be forthwith rented and fitted up, barely for himself and a male attendant, while a woman was to undertake the house work. What he directed was accomplished within a few hours, and that very night

Oberon was removed in his carriage to the small tenement hurriedly prepared to receive him. But carpets or hangings of any kind were not needed—the bedstead was of iron, the bed a mattress, and as few pieces of furniture as could be managed with were left in the room. The windows were partially open, although it was the cold of a bitter December, and warmth was maintained through coverings and by the aid of good brisk fires, the patient taking care to be placed out of the current. This arranged, and with his Bible and prayer-book by his side, Oberon Spell lay down to die. His patients he had all passed over to a young physician of the metropolis, recently started in the profession, and of whose devotedness and skill he had the very highest opinion. His friend, Sir Ulysses Kennard was by his side the next day, and fully recognizing the gravity of the case, gave such directions to his former pupil, Dr. Allerton—who now supplied Dr. Spell's place in the village—and to both the male and female attendants, as the exigency demanded.

But there were two—the patient's wife and mother—who would not be warned off from that house of the plague. No force of persuasion, not even the command of Oberon himself, could induce Iris to quit his presence. She had a couch placed there, and on it she would sit by day, and sleep, if she could, by night, but in that room she would remain, and nobody should remove her but with him alive or dead.

“Is he not mine, entirely mine? Has he not

raised me to his own grand height?—taught me to be self-sacrificing and noble, till, like himself, we became one—one in heart and soul—one undying. I will not be torn from him, no! not by anyone.”

“And your children?”

“Ah! do not, do not torture me! They are well; you all will take care of them. But my husband! my great and glorious husband! I will watch over him—cling to him—and suck in his last precious breath, if it must be so, and die with him. We will not be separated.”

“My dear,” Mrs. Trensham said, with melancholy resignation, “I, his mother, will suffice if there must be a second victim—for I fear there will be another—let me go with him. I am old, dear Iris; Trensham cannot be many years off from his grave; but it is my place to watch by the side of my sick child—my only child.”

“No, mamma!—no; I will stay here. Do you, dear, remain downstairs. Make yourself as comfortable as you can in that best room; we will both relieve one another in watching, but I must be present during every moment of his illness.”

So it was finally arranged: the wife and mother took up their stations as sentinels over the plague-stricken hero. Not a sound could be heard through the house but the groans of the sick man; he was suffering the most acute pain. One violent paroxysm terminated in delirium. The patient first uttered two wild ejaculations, and then subsided into a kind of whispering conversation with Iris and Hugh and his mother, and now and then Hilary Dove, Priory

Park, and Ernestine Wheatley were all mentioned. It was childhood's and youth's scenes once more gone through. These recollections, under such fearful circumstances, deeply affected Iris; she thought her strength of nerve must give way beneath the trial, but she had resolved to watch her husband, to wait upon him and attend to him, whatever might be the consequences to herself; and by a firm resolution she overcame her grief, and steeled her heart to go through the ordeal of a wife's duty.

She sat by his side in his fits of frenzy, occasionally answering him when with staring eyes he pointed his ghastly questions at her. When he slept she frequently wiped and kissed his face, the tears often falling fast upon him. There was no dread, fastidiousness, or false delicacy about her at such a crisis, everything yielded to the strong voice of affection. At times she snatched a little food and rest for herself, and then, as had been arranged, the mother took her place, and watched beside the sick-bed of her son. Though steeped in sorrow, Mrs. Trensham was resigned, and occupied every moment she could spare from the patient in prayer. She invoked the aid of Heaven, but it appeared to be God's will that Oberon Spell should pass away, as one of the chiefs of the noble army of martyrs who have fallen victims to their self-sacrifice and devotion to the bed of pestilential fever. Even Sir Ulysses Kennard at length gave only very faint hopes of his recovery, and Dr. Allerton, who had had

much special practice in the London Fever Hospital, expressed a similar opinion.

Ah! who can tell the pangs of Iris as she saw the grim death wrenching her husband from her. She felt as if a cruel murder were being done. She would have screamed out in her great agony, but she knew where she was, and she gazed upon the sorrowing, but meek, mother in silent prayer at the foot of her dying son's couch. Iris saw this and rebuked herself, and rallied all her senses together.

"And cannot you do anything for him?"

"No, madam," was Dr. Allerton's melancholy reply. "He may rally, that is if his constitution is strong enough; but I fear all will soon be over."

"Nothing — nothing — nobody — nothing! and Oberon, my Oberon is to die! and I am to stand and see him murdered! Not so—not so, oh! God of mercy! Here, Richard, bring me hot water; I will bathe him all over in water as hot as can be borne, and with the mild soap he uses I will wash his precious skin and pores; it cannot harm my dear one." And with her own hands did the devoted wife gently, but still with a certain amount of vigour, sponge her husband's body with a purifying soap and tepid water. Meantime new bed clothes were prepared and fresh linen, and then she watched through the night, unceasingly and continually attending him and supplying such drinks as were permitted. Why should we weaken the force of a miracle? — a therapeutical miracle!

Oberon Spell gradually recovered from the paroxysm of the fever, and began from that hour to show symptoms of a return to health. Sir Ulysses Kennard expressed his profoundest astonishment and joy, and Dr. Allerton was no less earnest in his demonstrations of pleasure.

“What you did may have saved him,” said the cautious old physician. “However, there he is, and once again I say I can do nothing more for him. He is past my doctoring; I leave him now to you, madam. Good-bye, you noble specimen of the wife of a truly noble gentleman.”

Yes, it was the dead revived; and pious people said, and said we are to hope with good reason, that it was the constant and earnest prayer of the mother, combined with the sacramental operation of the wife, that worked this miracle.

There was one more devoted heart, whose ministrations in this case ought not to be forgotten. From the moment Oberon was stricken down, Deborah modestly asserted her right to attend to him, or to share the labour and watching. Her affectionate homage was not disregarded. She was often permitted to take the man Richard's place with the dear being who was still a child in her hands. Had she not been present at his birth and rocked him in his cradle? Oh! it would be cruel not to allow her to do her duty by him. The calls made at the residence of Oberon were numerous, and included the rich and poor of the neighbourhood, all eager to learn what hopes, if any, were entertained of his recovery. Among these Cathe-

rine Flowers was not to be seen. She ascertained daily from Dr. Allerton, in her walks among the poor, the state of his patient; and when she learnt that he was given over, her grief was deep and bitter. She was about to lose the only man that she had ever loved, loving him up from childhood, even as his own wife when a child too had loved him. But this, her secret, had been long locked in her bosom.

The danger of death roused all Oberon's friends, and both the Levers and their widowed daughter were constant in their inquiries and presence. Caroline Graff mourned his illness and suffering much more than she did her husband's death. So contrary are the affections sometimes distributed in the world.

But for Oberon himself, he had no heart of gratitude for the moment but to God and home. "Here are my saviours, under Heaven," he said, holding his wife by his right hand and his mother by his left, while Deborah looked on at a humble distance. "Here, and there—yes, there. Ah! Granny Deborah! You see I am good for a romp after all."

"Ah, bless you, sir. It was all of the young missus and the hot water. That and my missus's good prayers saved you!"

"You are right, Deborah. God bless you all."

"And now," said Sir Ulysses Kennard, one day to the convalescent patient, "I suppose you too must go on a continental tour?"

"Oh, no! no!" said Iris. "No foreign lands

for him. No, we will cling to dear old England. Do, Sir Ulysses, leave Oberon to me. I, you know, am in my own way one of the faculty."

"Oh, I had forgotten, dear madam. Let it be as you say. How is it to be, Spell?"

"I suppose we must listen to the advice of the hydropathic professor," said Oberon, laughing.

In a week from that date Oberon, his wife and eldest son and daughter, with a proper suite, began a slow tour over England and Scotland, taking the principal watering places *en route*. The weather was favourable for the season, and as the equipage of every kind was all that money could command, the journey was rendered very pleasant and re-invigorating.

It should be mentioned that Oberon had now resolved to give up his medical practice. He handed over his professional interest and connexion on very liberal terms to young Dr. Allerton, whom he deemed most fit to succeed him, and he once more resumed his plain name of Oberon Spell, dropping the doctor as little suited to a mere layman.

"And now, my dear," said Iris, one day, as they were both enjoying some of the commanding scenery of Wales, "I think you may return to your poem with advantage. Do get up images as you stroll, while I accompany those wild creatures there, and keep them out of harm. I now begin to believe with you that a certain amount of poetic and romantic feeling is necessary to the perfect enjoyment of life. So proceed to do good, and be happy in its accomplishment. But remember you had to work

first and to get money before you could poetize at leisure. The tribe generally begin at the wrong end, as you did, dear, long ago." And she ran away laughing, putting back her fair hair, which the wind had dishevelled.

"How young she is still and beautiful, the mother of twelve children, all living too. This in itself is high poetry." And the husband and poet turned to gaze on his wife, admiring her full white neck and graceful motions with the fresh feelings of early manhood.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COUNTESS SUMMERS.



THE cure of one invalid naturally brings us to think of another. We left the Countess Summers with that pining sickness of the heart which was not to be called disease, but which often baffles the physician more than a mortal malady. She too had recovered from a dangerous fever, and the one she only loved or ever loved was her benignant restorer. She had, 'tis true, a husband, but he was entirely unworthy of the name; and she had fond and devoted parents, but they were now both advanced in years, and her father was almost ever immersed in affairs of State. She was thus pretty well isolated. Her own private fortune was ample to support her in the utmost luxury and pomp of her rank and station. She had, therefore, at her command all that wealth and title could bring. But we need not say how forsaken and lonely she felt in the world. She went her tour, always varying the scenes. Her mother accompanied her throughout. But her recovery was very gradual, if indeed she could ever be pronounced convalescent. However, it is impossible that time will not induce forgetfulness of some kind; and just this benefit of the oblivion produced by years and distance was Ernestine's blessing. She

did not spend many months abroad. But on her return she avoided Edelstone and the memories connected with it. She passed her time partly in Ireland and partly in Scotland, for her father had estates in both ; but her principal residence was in Northumberland and in her London mansion. Here she had to meet her husband occasionally. But this did not prove a serious inconvenience. They were separated in every form but law, and they could both manage to reside in that large house without producing any personal collision or disagreeable rencontre. But the truth is, nothing bitter ever passed between them. The countess was too naturally dignified and felt too deeply wounded to remonstrate further with her husband, believing, as she did from experience, that it would be all in vain ; and the earl himself, as we intimated, had a separate establishment elsewhere, in which was a woman who made it her business to charm and please, and who, with a numerous family, claimed his protection and love. The rest of his time, we know, was spent in the active and exciting scenes of the gambler's life, of which the turf always occupied the greater share, though it must be admitted not the one which contributed most to his ruin.

However, Earl Summers now badly needed money. His former liberal and uninquisitive banker, Jonathan Cubborn, had refused, as we have seen, all further accommodation. A suit was dragging its miserably slow length through the Court of Chancery, designedly protracted by every artifice of

legal skill, in order to weary Cubborn. The domestic calls on the earl were constant and heavy, and were of a character which his nature, degraded as it was, could not neglect. He loved his mistress as well as he could love any object which contributed to his pleasure ; and from her he had never experienced an angry look or contradiction, but rather fond caresses, endearing smiles, and such steady demonstrations of affection, real or feigned, as must have made an impression on a much less impressionable heart. For his children he entertained the warmest attachment. They presented a handsome group taken together, and with the peculiar attractions of each, their fascinations were irresistible to the world-worn peer.

Throughout the whole course of his life till now the earl had never known the actual want of money. The usurer was ever at hand to supply his need, and the income from his estates was considerable. His marriage with Ernestine Wheatley did not add much to his own resources. The lady brought with her vast wealth and the promise of much more ; but at the suggestion of the Marquis of Lorndale, the whole of Miss Wheatley's fortune, present or in expectancy, was settled on herself and for the benefit of her children, should she have any ; in the other event, its disposition was left entirely to her own selection and judgment.

That annual allowance which Earl Summers made to his mistress, and which heretofore had been paid so regularly, was now in arrears. The pride of the earl was deeply wounded, and his fatherly affection

painfully awakened. They—his children—and that patient woman at all events must not suffer. He turned everywhere—he tried every ingenious stratagem—some of them even questionable—to raise money, but for the first time he found it difficult. With security, nothing so easy. He had always proved it so. But without this guarantee, he discovered that his travels among the usurers and his appeal to wealthy friends were all unavailing. Besides, his now notorious contention with Cub-born made capitalists who had to lend, and who might have lent even large sums to a nobleman of his high position, wary in connecting themselves in money transactions with him.

Almost driven to despair by actual penury, the unhappy nobleman determined to appeal to his wife and strive to move her compassion. While both were staying at the mansion in Belgrave-square, he sought her one day in her own room, requested an audience, and resolved to lay his position candidly before her, concealing of course its offensive features.

“I suppose,” he began, “you have heard of my difficulties, Ernestine? The Staffordshire and Salop estates are involved, are in fact in Chancery, as you know; and I have lost my income.”

“Well.”

“My father, as you are also aware, is incensed against me, and will not advance me a farthing. It is no unusual thing for a husband to appeal to his wife in such an emergency.”

“Do not, my lord, desecrate the sacred name of

wife and husband. That holy relation has never existed between us. Did I consider that you were my husband and I your wife—although such a feeling as affection had never existed in my breast—I would listen to your story with sympathy, and all that I have would be at your disposal.”

“And why not now? We *are* husband and wife—bound by law human and divine. You took me for worse as well as for better, in sickness of mind as well as in health of mind, and no power but death can annul that solemn obligation.”

“Indeed! But I do not seek to annul it to the world. Here in my heart—in our home—in all that we ought to hold in common, it has been long ago annulled by your misconduct.”

“There is no use going back upon the past. You cannot, Ernestine, judge of my temptations. Besides, vengeance is not thine.”

“I feel the force of all you say. The arguments, you know, are not new to me. I have heard them from your lips before, and I have forgiven you—forgiven you as far as you needed forgiveness. You wanted only money, and I granted it, but always with a promise from you of atonement. That was the condition—the bond. You have broken it. You took the current coin, and forgot the nobleman’s word of gold. What do you seek now?”

“Well, to be candid with you, I have no money at all.”

“And you wish to live on your wife?—on the unhappy person whom her own forbearance in using

the laws of her country allows you still to be called by the name of husband. You wish to live on me."

"Do not be cruel, Ernestine. I am in distress of mind, and it does not become you to torture me with these bitter recollections and censures. I ask you in plain terms—and you know how much the effort costs me—will you assist me? I will repay you."

"That is not required. At once and for all, I say, Lord Summers, I will not contribute to support you in a career of vice."

"But I have given up my connexion with the turf, and all that. I suppose you know it?"

"Yes, I know that you were compelled to sell at a sacrifice a noble stud of horses, and to forego the gaming-table and other questionable speculations; but I do not refer to a career which I hope is past, and at which I rejoice. I say that I will not be an abettor in your life of sin. I presume you understand me."

"Oh! that! Surely you are not jealous, Ernestine? It is somewhat late for that."

Lady Summers did not deign a reply.

"But you do not answer me. Do you mean to assist me?"

"I have pronounced my decision."

"And I am to desert—— But I will not be tempted into irrelevant subjects. Am I to take your answer as final?"

"Completely final. I have done."

"No, madam, you have not done. Think you I

am not aware of the cause of all this coldness and breach of duty? Do you believe me ignorant of your meetings and your love-sick fancies for that man, Spell?—nay, you must hear me. There have been those who have reported your weakness—I will not use a harsher word—to me in no favourable terms. Pray, do you know who this fellow, Spell, is with all his newly-acquired riches?”

“Well, go on, my lord.”

“Do you know he is the perpetrator of a gross fraud?”

“I am aware he had to bear the imputation for a wrongful demand. The very villain who holds you now by false means, no doubt to a great extent, in his bondage, brought a noble being and nature somehow into his meshes.”

“What noble being, pray?—what noble nature?—Oberon Spell?”

“Ay, sir, Oberon Spell. I did not think to dishonour his name by introducing it into any conversation with you. But you outrage all propriety. You have set spies to work, or encouraged them to observe me; who they are I know, and the slender ground they have to go upon. Well, I did once—it is now some years, long years, ago—meet Mr. Spell in a lane near the Priory. I spoke to him. I was not your wife then. He has since been my aid and guide in helping the sick and poor, and with your consent has been my doctor; and I feel that I owe him my life under Heaven—and—and a debt of eternal gratitude.”

“I have heard you say, without all this pious

preface, you owe him your life, as if there were no God !”

“Cunning infidel ! you who never kneel to a prayer or attend a church when you can escape the ordeal—you—— But—well—I do owe him my life, under Heaven, I repeat. And now let me tell you with the same sacred reserve, that were I single to-morrow, I would rather serve Oberon Spell as his meanest slave, or beg my bread with him through the world, than be the wife of Earl Summers. I am sorry to have spoken thus, but you agonize me.”

“For him ?”

“Ay, for him—on his account. When I look at his noble countenance, his grand proportions and figure, his graceful movements, his glorious intellect and heroic conduct, and think of you—for I too, my lord, can be candid——”

“Well ?”

“Nothing, my lord ; but I sometimes feel that I am not Oberon Spell’s wife.”

“Fortunately for him you are not. He is the father of a noble family.”

Ernestine turned very pale, and trembled. The blow struck home. She leaned back a while in her chair, drew a deep breath or two, then rose, and said faintly, “The interview, Lord Summers, has ended.”

“But——”

“I will write to you.”

The baffled earl saw it was useless lingering longer. He had overshot the mark. His position

was worse than it had been before. He bowed, and quitted the room.

Ernestine, left alone, gave way to her grief. Here in that house of splendour was a desolate heart, if ever there was one. A flood of burning tears relieved her anguish, and gradually thoughts like these passed through her mind.

“ Yes, it was fortunate. Had he married me he might have been childless. Mysterious Power, who for wise purposes orderest all things, I bow my head in humble submission to Thy wise decree, and thank Thee for his sake that Iris Dove was his wife. It would be a loss to the world if he should not live on in his children. So be it—it is well ! Who can fathom the wonderful providence of God ? We must wait for events, and see His prescience, goodness, and wisdom in them. It might have been otherwise too. Ah ! I never loved *him*—my heart was gone already. It was wrong—sinful and wrong. I married him because I loved another ; and they said marriage would cure my love—a most wicked doctrine. Oh ! God !—oh ! God ! Thou knowest how it hath increased it—made it deep, lasting, inextinguishable. Surely this is crime ; but if crime, I have watched against it, prayed against it, fought against it—all to no purpose ; and the vice of Summers hath this amount of vindication. I will write to him. He must not want the means of maintaining his station. But I will not knowingly contribute to the support of adultery.”

Saying this, the Countess Summers retired to her chamber, and having endeavoured by ablutions

to restore her countenance to its wanted serenity, she was at length sufficiently composed to address a letter to the earl, which she did in the third person, and in the briefest possible terms. She however enclosed a cheque for five thousand pounds, and promised him the same amount annually, with of course the full use and command of any mansions she may reside in, the entire expenses to be borne by her. Having performed what she considered to be a necessary act of duty, she resumed her ordinary avocations in the world with calmness and composure. She alone was mistress of the secret agony which momentarily consumed her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EARL SUMMERS AND CHARLOTTE WINSTANLEY.



WHEN Earl Summers had read Ernestine's letter, he was much moved. The man was not without a heart; his passions were often uncontrolled and his feelings too lively; he was commonplace in his affections; but he bore his countess a certain degree of love, difficult to describe, so much was there in it of mere instinct, and so much of respect and esteem for her excellent qualities. To test the strength and direction of his sympathies—for he thought of this matter—he would sometimes place before his mind the fancied scene of his wife and his mistress, Charlotte, the mother of his children, in a position of danger, and consider which of the two he would first run to save. His impulses would urge one way and his judgment the other; yet such was the nature of the man—proud and calculating to an extent unknown even to himself—that he believed in the hour of peril he would be found beside his countess and abandon his mistress. It was a war not between head and heart, but of both conflicting. He had no true affection.

The result of his deliberations, on receiving Lady Summers' brief note, was a more decided resolution. He would manage his income. He would cease to

be a dependent on any one but his wife, for the present. He would try and bring his expenditure within his means. This, with the clandestine establishment he had to maintain, would no doubt be a difficult matter. Perhaps his law-suit with Cubborn might turn out more favourably than he expected, or by protracting it to the utmost tether of Chancery he might induce an arrangement.

But first he would visit the marquis, his father, and endeavour to obtain from him some explanation of the curious hint he had thrown out in regard to the Salop and Staffordshire property. The Marquis of Lorndale was not very accessible. He had never been so. But the recent disclosures in reference to his younger son caused him to issue a direction to his servants that Earl Summers should be carefully excluded from his presence. It was not, therefore, without difficulty, and only after repeated applications combined with a promise that he did not seek the interview to ask for money, that his father admitted him to an audience in his library.

"Well, my lord, what is the matter now?"

"I sought this meeting on an affair of great importance to me, and not irrelevant to the interests of the whole family. I want to be satisfied. I seek an elucidation of the mystery and doubt you have raised about my title to the Erlam Court and Blackmines estates."

"I am not accustomed to give needless explanations."

"But, my lord, it is a duty you owe to the possessor and owner."

"The less you employ the latter term, the more appropriate will it be under the circumstances."

"What are those circumstances? Surely I have a right to de——to know."

"Look at the Court of Chancery."

"I do, and I feel safe there—safe for an arrangement; but your language points another way. I pray you, be explicit, my lord."

"I will when I must, not before. Suffice it, I have said, that your title and Cubborn's claim might both be one day upset."

"May I ask, if the possible claimant knows his own alleged rights?"

"I will go so far as to say, I think he does not."

"Then the man is living."

"It were well that you should know he is."

"It were better, my lord, that I should know the man."

"I think so, too—Oberon Spell."

"My lord, you amaze me."

"A worthy gentleman, by all accounts. I have heard Wheatley intimate his regret that Oberon Spell had not his daughter."

"You might have spared me that. But I have no time for jeal—resentment now. I pray you, my lord, since you have gone so far, reveal all."

"No, my lord, I have said what I desired and intended to say. It behoves you to comport yourself becomingly to that gentleman. Your destiny and that of your wife, to a certain extent, might be yet in his hands."

"Clouds and mysteries—abominations. But your hint shall not be lost on me. I have come, among other things, to inform you that the countess has behaved very nobly to me; read that letter," and he handed him Ernestine's note.

"Very good, very kind. She will lose the opportunity of being so liberal should certain events take place. But how do you intend to employ her bounty?"

"I purpose living within my means."

"The first step towards financial reform. Of course that friend of yours is to go."

"I hope to make some arrangement. The affair is difficult and delicate. The lady, I speak plainly, my lord, is deeply attached to me."

"You think so. Plead poverty, and cut off her allowance for a twelvemonth, and fond as she seems or is, she will cool, and you will get rid of her."

"I do not think so."

"There is no life-settlement, I hope."

"No, I was too wise for that. But she loves me, and will cling to me to my dying day. Then there are the other responsibilities."

"How many?"

"Six in all."

"Summers, you are an unmitigated—— But I will not anger myself with anything so worthless. If I hear you have honourably, but firmly and resolutely, put away that woman, and that you have taken steps to give your children an education and a trade to keep them from vice, I shall be glad to add to your income, in order that the family might

not be disgraced. You can go now, Summers, and remember to avoid all quarrel with Oberon Spell."

Earl Summers bowed and took his departure. He knew the force of his father's final warning, and that on obedience to it depended his favour. But the knowledge and the injunction only added to his perplexity. His hatred of Oberon was of many years' nurture and standing. Before his marriage he had been informed of Ernestine's attachment to the young poet. Some cunning eye, some creature of watchful suspicion had dropped the poison thus early in his ear. He had observed with what facility she quoted and with what care she preserved every scrap of his verse. He half suspected the cause of her pining illnesses. He had those to inform him of the accidental meeting in the lane, nor had the peculiar tenderness manifested during the convalescence from the fever escaped his jealous notice; but the recent open declaration wrung from Ernestine, and her odious comparison of him with her paragon, buried the wound still deeper, and made it rankle and fester, ready to break at any time. What were his feelings when he learnt that the man whom he so intensely hated might inherit every tittle of his property and the settlements on his wife also, thus throwing her completely in his power? He was obliged to suppress his emotions before his father; but, for the first time in his life, Charles Earl Summers began to experience impulses of savage revenge.

There was no time however now for resentment.

He was eager to accomplish his father's wishes, so far as his illicit incumbrances were concerned. He thought he could get rid of them by a sort of compromise. His five thousand pounds were nearly exhausted in the payment of numerous small debts, and he had but a modicum left of that large sum to meet the pending necessary arrangement. He found that he could not be liberal and conclusive with his present meagre capital. He could only make a payment of 100% out of the twelve months' arrears due, and promise the next year to be more generous.

"And for the time going on?"

"You must manage, my love, as well as you can. I have no more money."

"Manage! I cannot! We cannot live on the air! I can pledge your credit; but that, to use the right word, would be unprofessional."

"Strange language this, Charlotte, from your lips!"

"Oh, nonsense, Summers! Do not be critical; leave that to poor authors. We have enough of poverty at home. How do you think a hundred pounds will pay back debts and keep the children and this establishment?"

"I was in truth thinking of breaking it up."

"Breaking it up—breaking up my house!"

"Not so emphatic, dear. I hope I have some share in it?"

"No, my lord, no share in it. It is mine. Do you think your paltry five hundred a year would have supported this establishment? You are much mistaken if you do!"

“Indeed ; I was not aware you had private property !”

“That is neither here nor there. I am grown tired of this life of debt and broken promises. I can do better—that is, if I like. I wish to be free. I know the settlement you ought to make and which I expect. Make me this, and I shall be satisfied.”

“You astound me !”

“Astound you ! Most likely ! You cannot measure the craft of woman—and she had need to be crafty. You come around her, you make eternal vows, as true in God’s eyes as is marriage. We believe them, because we know that marriage with you is next to impossible. We trust to a nobleman’s word of honour. This is our matrimony, our wedlock. We fly with you from our home ; give up our entire will and person to you ; become your slaves, your fond, obedient, obsequious slaves, the mothers of your bastard children—our lasting badges of disgrace. And what do you do in return ? What did you do, my lord, after my trusting you and loving you three whole years ? Why, you began by taking to yourself a wife who hated and loathed you, and loved another. You did not cast me off, ’tis true ; it was not convenient. You did not like Lady Summers ; but you reduced me to the condition of a mere concubine, for which despised condition I was not born. Do you think I could continue to love you for this ? I grew jealous and hated you. Start ! ay, do start ! You know you cannot frighten me. I have that mettle in me which cannot be awed or broken. But I was

forced to submit. I had my debts and my children, so I wept in silence and said nothing; nay, I belaboured you with false caresses, and pretended quiet submission, while the presents and allowance lasted, but when these ceased I laughed at you, mocked you, befooled you, and looked to myself!"

"Poor wretch—unworthy of my notice!"

"Poor! No; it is you who are poor—poor as misery can make you, poor to distraction in losing my imagined love—for I know you love me and me alone, with the best love of which your coarse nature is capable; poor in knowing that my once pure love and late false love have been turned into hate, and now into contempt and scorn; poor to beggary in your miserable offer of a hundred pounds; poor in your ruined character, which makes me ashamed to be thought your mistress: poor and despicable every way. Go, wretched being, go! I throw you off—abandon you! This is my free, unshackled privilege. Go! and never dare to approach me or darken my doors again!"

"Fiend in human shape, I go! but my children go with me. They shall be properly—religiously trained, and not left to your vicious example."

"They shall do what I do; they shall be reared as I wish them—no better than I. They shall not live to despise me, as I do you. They are mine—mine by law—I can do as I like with them. They shall know my story and follow my example, and learn to hate you. My father is dead, my mother is dead—I did not share their dying blessing; my sisters, after me, are gone astray, some to worse

shame than mine ; and my brothers are far off, to avoid our disgrace and contamination ; you, too, are gone and your miserable pittance. Go, my lord ! Charlotte Winstanley is provided for !”

Earl Summers had been standing ready to turn on his heel and depart for some time, but he heard the angry woman out, and noted with a deep but secret pang her final observation. Holding the door in his hand he said,—

“My lawyer shall arrange with you. I leave you.” And so saying he took his departure.

He was then in a mood to throw himself at his wife’s feet and invoke her pardon, to tell her he appreciated, esteemed, and loved all her noble qualities, her wife-like purity and constancy, that he repented sincerely and for ever of his former vicious career, and would strive by years of devotion and love to merit and win her affections. But rapidly as these remorseful and secretly selfish thoughts swept across his breast, the image of Oberon Spell—for ever Oberon Spell—rose up as a spectre to startle him back to jealousy and hatred again. Here was his natural enemy, the foe that stood between him and his wife’s heart, the foe that would come like a ghoul and grasp his property. He would not now dally with love, or regret, or repentance. They were gone—all gone—with her the false concubine, he would not revive that wild passion—to make love to a statue. But his enemy was real, his wants were real, his submission to his father too must be real ; but, beware, Earl Summers, beware ! lest blood-guiltiness possess your soul !

Nevertheless, exasperated as he was, he saw his lawyer, and insisted upon making a settlement of a hundred a year for life on each of his children, taking care that this provision should be inalienable. This effected, he considered he had done his duty by the treacherous mistress. 'Tis true he would sometimes think of her, of her falsehood and ingratitude, and speculate on the cause of so much defiance and hate in a being once, beyond all doubt, his adorer. He was not left long in conjecture or mystery.

It was on that memorable cockney holiday, the Derby day, which succeeded the events we have just narrated, that Earl Summers, in the company of some chiefs of the turf—members of the Jockey Club—was rambling over the course, talking animatedly on the occurrences of the hour. The attention of the earl was drawn by one of his companions, Sir Eresby North, to a gentleman in a tandem, with a remarkably well dressed and strikingly handsome lady. The man himself was conspicuously ugly: his nose was broken-in, and he was otherwise sinister looking and forbidding.

“Do you see that couple, Summers? I think I never saw ‘beauty and the beast’ till now.”

He noticed that his friend had turned suddenly pale and was silent.

“Ah! I see; I thought I should remember that lady. Come, Summers! courage, man! She is only a woman after all, a very light, fast woman. I have been gulled! you have been gulled! we

are all gulled who take up with such cattle ; and we both should feel heartily ashamed of ourselves."

"I own I do ; but I feel —— Well, let us go on ; they see us. I will not afford them the gratification of noticing them."

"Oh ! they are conspicuous enough—a swell and a jade in a tandem. No wonder the Derby day should be immortal. Come, Summers, man, rouse ; we must get on, 'and take our places.'"

But Earl Summers could not be roused ; the noise of many waters, of a vortex which was drawing him in, was in his ears. He was becoming hardened and desperate. He came not on that course as a gambler, he had forsworn that ; he only intended to bet lightly, and so to hedge that he could not be a loser. But the sight he had seen disturbed and bewildered him, and the champagne he drank destroyed his balance. He became over-excited ; he bet at random, entirely at fault in his usual judgment, and the result of the day's transactions was an account of some seventy thousand pounds against the unfortunate nobleman. He was now ready for any deed of desperation.

CHAPTER XIX.

NEW DISCOVERIES.



HE left Oberon Spell and his wife rambling about for health, and enjoying it in abundance. In one of their desultory walks among the hills of Cheshire, the whole group was overtaken by a heavy storm of rain, which seemed to have set in for the day. They were some distance from the next village, and were getting thoroughly soaked, to the great alarm of Iris, who feared the damp might injuriously affect her husband, not long recovered from a bed of fever. There was no way-side inn to flee to, and no shelter whatever but the hedges and trees, under which Oberon said it would be unadvisable to stop, as no ill effects whatever could arise from the wet, so long as the body was kept warm by constant motion. It was the cooling with damp clothes on that constituted the danger. Accordingly they wandered about, not even quite certain that they were on their route for their hotel, which must be at least some eight miles off. Oberon and Iris had always been great pedestrians, and never thought much of a foot trip of twelve miles. Their children had been trained in the same manner to long walks, and the two which accompanied them were even more hardy than themselves. At length the boy descried in a

lane which intersected two main roads, a small cottage, and hurried to inform his mother of the circumstance. Iris was delighted, and moved forward for this solitary house. The exterior presented a neat patch of garden, in the centre of which the cottage was placed. It was a small tenement of bricks and mortar covered with a grey-coloured dash. There were a few outhouses set up, without any pretensions to style or uniformity. The owner was a gardener, as was indicated by a small board over his door to the following effect: "Gardens laid out and carefully kept, on economical terms, by Thomas Spriggs, lanskip gardener."

Iris did not hesitate to open the small gate, and request shelter for her party; a favour which was immediately granted. The whole four were ushered into a parlour without a fire, but Iris begged for a place beside the kitchen hearth as they were all very wet. This was speedily allowed, so Oberon and his wife and two children stood around a blazing kitchen fire drying their clothes, while their servant, Foote, made himself busy in assisting the good housewife to get up a similar blaze in the parlour. This was soon accomplished, and the table laid with the service and provender which Foote invariably bore in a knapsack in these pedestrian excursions. He had been an old soldier, the servant of his colonel, and was quite up in getting together a proper commissariat. When all was ready the group returned to the best room once more, and were about to sit down to the excellent repast placed before them, when all of a sudden the attention of Constance was

arrested by a small miniature portrait on the mantelshelf.

“Mamma, here is a portrait exactly like that in your brooch.”

“Good heavens! and so it is, Oberon, dear; look here! Is there not a Divinity shaping our ends?”

“How wonderful! We must have the good woman in.”

“Foote,” said Iris, “tell Mrs. Spriggs—I think that is the name—to step in here a moment. Now, my dear, pray do you say nothing; leave it all to me. Oh, Mrs. Spriggs, you have a striking portrait on your mantel-shelf;—pray be seated; this one. Do you remember whose it is?”

“Oh! my lady, I am sure it is a blessing to me to have lived to this day. I have heerd your name is Spell, and I couldn’t help but kip my eyes on the young lady there so like the picter. Why it is her dead image! Did anyone ever see sich a miracle! But, my lady, that is the likeness of one long since no more: the mother, dear lady, of my mother’s old master, Heinrich; he was a Mr. Heinrich, that is Henry, Spell. He was a furraner, my lady, and of course when I heerd the name, I thought ye was too, my lady, of the same family.”

“Did you ever see Mr. Heinrich Spell?”

“Bless you no, ma’am. I was brought up in this part of the country. It is my sister who was in Old Broad-street with my mother. Them was the offices of Mr. Spell. Poor souls, they are all dead. Perhaps ye heerd of the old gentleman’s accident? Mother did not live long after, and my

sister follered. But I are not answered your question, mum. That ere portrait was guv me by my mother, and she told me to kip it carefully, as you see I does, my lady, for I prizes it."

"But, Mrs. Spriggs, what I want to know is, who gave it to your mother?"

"God knows, mum," and Mrs. Spriggs blushed a deep scarlet; "I suppose it war lying about somewhere. I never asked; I was glad enough to have it, an' I always thought like that it would turn up for summut good some day."

"But how do you know it is the portrait of Mr. Henry Spell's mother?"

"Wall, I never see'd the lady, 'tis true, mum, unless that be her there come to life again; but my mother guv me a letter with it, you see, mum—this was after her dear master's death, and she had care of his chambers, as I said, mum. This letter I have upstairs, but it is all Hebrew to me, it is written in a furrin language. But a man as once cum'd here read it for me in English, and it told all about the portrait, d'ye see, mum."

"Of course you can produce that letter?" said Iris.

"Yes, mum, I have it safe enough; but d'ye see, my lady, I prizes it. We are but middling people, mum, hard-working with nuffin to spare, and I should not like to part with it."

"Nothing further from our intention than to lay any claim to it, Mrs. Spriggs. Run and fetch it; go immediately, there's a good woman. And now, my dear, let us draw in; you look fatigued. Come, dears."

The little family, attended by Foote, set-to with a vigorous appetite and soon finished a very hearty meal. Meantime Mrs. Spriggs's son was sent forward to the hotel to order a coach out to fetch back the party, the weather being considered too unfavourable for their own horses and carriage.

The moment the repast was over, Mrs. Spriggs was summoned.

"Well, have you the letter?"

"Yes, my lady."

"You have no objection, of course, to trust it to me?"

"Oh no, dear lady; but you see, my lady, it war guv to me to kip; and we are but pretty middling, struggling like, I may say, and——"

"And,—but you do not give me the letter, Mrs. Spriggs. The gentleman there is Mr. Henry Spell's grandson."

"Oh, indeed, mum; my duty to you, sir; I will guv the letter; but I hope, sir, you will consider a poor woman, sir; I kep it carefully."

"Certainly, you shall be thought of."

"But Oberon, my dear, had not Mrs. Spriggs better hand you the letter?"

"Do, mum, please do let the gentleman speak. The ladies, God bless 'em, sir, does so wish to have it all their own way. I like dealing with the gentlemen, mum, I does;" and Mrs. Spriggs began to laugh.

"An' there's a beautiful silk glove for the left hand, mum, worked all over—a lady's glove—which mother always understood from her master was the

glove of his dead mother. She heerd him say he never 'ad the tother."

"Have you that glove?"

"Oh dear, yes mum, nicely ropt up in a diaper napkin, 'tis quite as good as new. I have the glove and letter, and the picter in coorse is mine."

Oberon drew out his pocket-book. Mrs. Spriggs was all smiles.

"Stop, dear," said Iris, "let me ask Mrs. Spriggs one question. How much do you ask for the letter, the glove, and the portrait?—say at once."

"Oh dear, oh dear! I wish the gentleman had the management of matters, I do. But as you say it, mum, and I have no wish to kip the articles longer, though I know they war guv my mother by her master, that's certain. Well, mum, suppose—I am sure I don't know—but we have kep 'em a great while and set store by 'em like."

"There," said Oberon, who did not like haggling, "there, I suppose a ten pound note will satisfy you?"

"I will add another five to it," said Iris. "So you see the ladies are not so illiberal, Mrs. Spriggs; and, remember, we have not yet seen the glove or read the letter."

"True, my lady, true, mum;" and she reached her hand eagerly for the money. "Oh dear, things will so get down into the pocket—but here they be, mum, and do kip the portrait. It is yours, and so is the letter and glove, mum."

"Were any other documents or articles belonging to my grandfather left you by your mother, in

clearing his offices after his death?" inquired Oberon.

"Oh dear, yes, a sight, sir, of old waste paper and sich like."

"And what did you do with them then?" asked Iris, eagerly.

"I never seed um, mum; but I heerd from mother that there was old account books, letters, and the like, which she sold for waste paper. They was only rubbish, mum, an' rags and bones, as we calls um."

"But were there no clerks to take charge of them?"

"I suppose there was, mum; but we never allows sich cattle to meddle with our perkisites. You see 'twas all over then. The master was dead, mum,"

"That will do, Mrs. Spriggs, you may leave the room now."

"Thank ye, mum;" at the same time muttering as she went, "Thank ye, for giving me leave to go out o' my own room—what next I should like to know? But I wonder if they is good, these notes. I wish I had ast a hundert pounds. That's the way the poor gets always cheated."

"Will you read the letter? Draw near, my dears. This is an important letter no doubt, and concerns us all."

Oberon with some difficulty deciphered the letter, which was written in the most beautiful style of a beautiful chirography—the German; but it was in the old folded form, without an envelope, and was seamed and much worn and defaced here and there.

However he succeeded by a little perseverance in making out its full meaning. It was intended to accompany the portrait, which it declared to be that of his mother, Margherita Spell. He had never seen his father nor heard much of him. He believed he was a German professor, or gentleman, or more likely a merchant of some kind. But he died before he was born. It then gave a short summary of the amiable qualities of his mother, who also departed when he was quite a young man, leaving him an orphan to battle with the world; for even the uncle whom he loved and trusted had left America for India, and was gone no one knew whither.

“ Well, my dear,” said Iris, after she had heard the letter read through, “ this tells us a great deal of what we know; it also helps to drive back, in some measure, the chances of the peerage; only there is old Wilhelm’s statement to my father, that the fiction of a merchant being Heinrich’s father was invented and maintained in order to blind the youth to his real parentage, and to save him a life of trouble and perhaps useless contention. I am glad my father’s evidence was immediately reduced to writing in America and properly attested; but the great point gained is the admission by Heinrich Spell, your undoubted grandfather, that the portrait now in my hand is that of his mother. That portrait to which the letter so succinctly refers is the counterpart of the miniature in my brooch, which we have my mother’s testimony came originally from the hands of Earl Wildermere, who treasured it carefully as

the portrait of a lady he once knew on the continent."

"The proofs, my dear, are roundabout; but chance, or rather Providence, this day has afforded us a wonderful clue. Both portraits and this letter must now be handed over to Mr. Ponder, and he will reduce to form whatever you have to say. But the carriage is come. I suppose we shall be all glad to get back to the hotel."

Mrs. Spriggs, who received a handsome gratuity for her accommodation, and all the remains of a delicious feast, was informed that her services might be required again, for which she would be adequately remunerated. This brought the housewife almost on her knees to "my lady, my dear, good, kind lady," and accompanied by her loudest and most energetic blessings, the hackney carriage rattled away to its destination.

CHAPTER XX.

FURTHER DISCOVERIES STILL.



WHILE Oberon and his wife were on their travels an eligible house was preparing for them in Eaton-square. The family was large, and Oberon had now an income of a clear eight thousand a year. They therefore resolved to live up to five thousand per annum, not exceeding that, and to lay out the remainder in such investments as should appear to combine perfect security with sure and invariable profit. The mansion was already prepared, and the incident in Cheshire now cut short the tourists' travels. They were glad to establish themselves once more in the metropolis—but under what different circumstances! Before there was the small house in Bayswater, with its struggles and subsequent disgrace and misery. All this was changed, and changed principally by the force and unforeseen results of industry and kindness; for, had not Iris been enabled to make her father remittances, he himself declared that he would have been compelled to leave New York long before he knew Wilhelm Spell, and thus have lost the chance of his happy acquaintance with that splendid El Dorado.

Iris was fully equal to her new position. She took to it as it were by instinct. She governed

without noise or display, and always with the proper effect. Her experience was not small, and she got through her parties and receptions with as much grace, ease and dignity as if she were to the manner born. People said, indeed, she was a commanding woman, and the servants throughout felt it ; but there was nothing of the upstart in her bearing, on the contrary, much good sense and suavity. As to Oberon, nature had long ago made him an accomplished gentleman, accomplished as only nature, and not any possible training can turn a gentleman forth to the world. He was not forward, nor yet in the slightest degree shy. His feelings were admirably under his control ; all his tastes were refined, his knowledge was extensive, his genius undoubted, his manners dignified yet affable and courteous. Their children partook in a high degree of the qualities of both parents, and were, as a group, the marvel and admiration of all circles.

The Levers, as we may surmise, were frequent visitors in Eaton-square. The engineer was a wealthy man, still his income—all derived from sheer labour and prudent speculation—was within that of Spell's. But there was a renewal of affection and former relations between the two families. Mrs. Lever, although she did not share in any of the bounty of old Wilhelm Spell—for a very good reason, that Mr. Hilary Dove kept her existence quite concealed—yet rejoiced infinitely that such unexpected wealth had fallen into the lap of her noble nephew. She felt, too, that if she had done Iris more justice, and perhaps Oberon also, she might

have been named to Wilhelm Spell, and remembered in his will. 'Tis true, she did not really want wealth. The riches in her own family were ample. The probability was, that out of Hugh Graff's five children not one of them would survive, they were all such hopeless invalids. Oberon was, next to her own daughter, the only being she truly cared for, as successor to her husband's large property and estates. Her affections, indeed, were rather placed upon Oberon's fine flock of children than on the miserable objects who called her grand-mamma.

As for Caroline, all her former affection for Oberon began to revive. His heart was now sacred from her, the property of another; she did not love him as one who dreamed of a return, or who desired it, or who would not recoil from such a result as impious and wicked. In this respect she wholly differed from the Countess Summers. Ernestine was ever on the brink of a precipice; often and often was she tempted—tempted by circumstances, by hard usage, and by a consuming, life-destroying passion—to do something desperate, to commit self-murder, or to reveal all to Oberon—to tell him her miseries, her distraction, and throw herself on his mercy for solace. Her better feelings and her religious sentiments fortunately carried the victory, and she was still the subdued, heart-broken, but pure and faithful wife of Lord Summers—more pure and faithful from the fiery ordeal through which she had passed.

Caroline Lever had never had any such over-

whelming temptations. Of a naturally sluggish and thoughtful disposition, she only nurtured a secret affection for her cousin, never permitting it or anything else to get the mastery; and perhaps it must also be added, that she loved Hugh Graff better far than Ernestine Wheatley could ever be brought to love Earl Summers, both husbands were so different in character. But the widow had now ample leisure and frequent opportunities of observing the exalted qualities of the husband whom she would continue to think she had lost, principally through the pride of her father and the strange liking of her mother for the young and promising artist who was excluding her own nephew, it may have been involuntarily, from the family circle. In this way she began to entertain the strong but calm love of a sister for Oberon Spell; thus paying back Iris, as she would playfully remark to her, for former acts of coquetry under the same sacred name, with her husband the painter.

As to Mr. Lever himself, he now entertained the highest regard for his nephew, and desired above all things to see his presence in Parliament. Sir Roger Wheatley, also, frequently expressed his wishes to the same effect, and promised him his direction and interest in securing his return at the next general election.

It was about the time under notice that one evening a gentleman called in Eaton-square, and said he was desirous of seeing Mr. Spell himself privately, if convenient then, if not he would come again the next morning. Oberon happened to hear

the words, and immediately directed the visitor to be shown into the library. He expected a revelation of some kind, and the appearance of the party now before him was calculated to raise his hopes still further.

"I presume I am speaking to Mr. Oberon Spell, senior? I believe there is another gentleman, his son, of that name?"

"I am Oberon Spell, senior. May I ask whom I have the honour of addressing?"

"Certainly, sir. I ought to have given my card, but I happen not to have one. I am Père Jaques Rémusat, a priest, and I have come from our beloved brother, Père Hugh Graff, who has not been long ordained, to place this parcel carefully in your hands. It is, he said, of the greatest importance."

"What, young Hugh become a Catholic priest?"

"Yes, and his aunt Agnes a nun—sister Teresa, as she is now called in the Church. You will give me an acknowledgment."

"Oh yes—a moment. These, indeed, my dear sir, are papers of great importance. I sincerely thank you. Will you join us in the drawing-room? We are quite alone—only the family and my mother to welcome you."

"Thank you, no, sir; I have some very important matters to arrange with my friend, the Rev. Dr. Perrot, chief priest of your French chapel here; and the cab is at the door."

"But where are you staying? My house is at your service."

"Thank you, dear sir, but I am on a short visit

with a compatriot of mine, who lives contiguous to the French ambassador's chapel. I will leave my address, should you desire to communicate with me." And Père Jaques Rémusat wrote down his name and present residence on a slip of paper. "I shall leave London for Dublin in three days from this—on Friday, and I shall be happy if I can take back to France on my return any communication with me, or be of any manner of service to you."

"Accept my sincere thanks, Père Rémusat. I shall only be too well pleased to avail myself of the opportunity of your speedy return to convey my lasting thanks to the worthy young priest, the nephew of my late esteemed friend."

So saying, Oberon saw the good priest to his cab, and returned in haste to the library, the papers still in his hand. He read the whole carefully once more, and peered at them through a magnifier, examining every turn and corner as he had observed the lawyers do. He felt satisfied in his own mind, then rang and desired the servant to tell Mrs. Spell and Mrs. Trensham, and Bertram, Oberon's eldest son—who happened to be at home from Eton—to join him as soon as they conveniently could.

When the three—in whom he recognised his fellow counsellors, as well as the dearest objects of his affection—were seated before him, he drew out the papers and read them consecutively, beginning with the letter from Père Hugh Graff. This epistle was a very long one, and entered into a rather unnecessary history of the motives which had induced

the writer to become a priest and his aunt a nun. This concluded, the young enthusiast then went on to say, that always remembering his uncle's directions to search every marriage register he could obtain access to in any of his movements and travels, and with the written instructions in hand, to see if he could find the entry of the marriage of Margherita Spell, of Vienna, with the Earl of Wildermere, an English nobleman — "With this ever uppermost in my mind I examined various registries, but all without success till yesterday, when in the vestry of the very church where I am placed, and which is the one in connexion with the house of Père de Foix, where my uncle died and you formerly lodged, I found, after due search, an entry, of which I send you an exact copy ; and, left between the pages, I came upon the important letter which I enclose. . . . It is evidently from Lord Wildermere himself. The register is a very old one, and had not been moved for years, so that the letter placed over the entry remained in it quite undisturbed. The moment I made the discovery, I sent, by the direction of my superior—who happened to be with me when I found the entry and letter—for a notary, and made a formal declaration of all the particulars. So you have now, my dear sir, from my hand a copy of the registry of the marriage of Margherita Spell with the fourth Earl of Wildermere, and a letter from the earl himself referring to the marriage, with all necessary attestations and proofs."

"Glory be to God in the highest !" said Iris, rising,

and speaking with her grand voice. "It is Hugh's spirit working for us. I see it—and you to go out of your way to that distant spot and very house, and Hugh to die, it may be said, where your great grandmother was married. There is indeed a Providence and a manifest connecting link in all this. Let us all kneel, and thank Heaven! Oberon, dear, pray."

The prayer which the poet, the husband, the mother, the son, and the father poured fourth to his Creator, and his family joined in, was one worthy of pious Christians. He thanked God for the blessings received, and asked, should it be to His honour and glory, that a full and final revelation might be soon made, so as briefly to end the ordeal and unravel the mystery; imploring at the same time grace to use such favours with proper moderation, justice, and charity.

"And now, my dear," said Iris, "let us return to the drawing-room to Constance and the others; they must wonder what has become of us. We can do nothing more in the matter till the morning. Give me the papers, Oberon! Nay, dear, give them to me, I will lock them away. I shall be with you all in a moment." Iris, the peeress in prospect, took the proofs of her husband's nobility, and locked them up with her most valuable jewels.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PROOF NEARS COMPLETION.



THE next day Mr. Ponder was summoned to a conference in the house in Eaton-square. He came at the hour appointed, and one by one the precious newly-discovered proofs were placed in his hand by Oberon. He read the letter of the young priest very carefully through, next that of Earl Wildermere, and Oberon translated the entry and remaining papers as he gave them over.

"The pear is fast ripening. I think I now see my way pretty clear. However, in a matter like this we must proceed regularly. I will submit the whole case to the attorney-general and Mr. Flanders, who has had much experience and practice in peerage claims. We must hear what they have to say."

About a week after this conversation, Oberon was requested by Mr. Ponder to meet the attorney-general and Mr. Flanders at the chambers of the former in King's Bench-walk, Temple. He accordingly attended. The consultation was a long one. Mr. Flanders went through the whole matter, taking up each point *seriatim*.

"I think," he said, "in a case of such magnitude,

we should require a positive confirmation of the genuineness of this letter," placing his finger on the presumed one from Earl Wildermere. "It looks very genuine, but unfortunately the paper on which it is written is foreign, and we are unable to apply to it the usual tests."

"I should think," said the attorney-general, "it would not be a matter of very great difficulty to find documents undoubtedly in the hand-writing of the fourth Earl of Wildermere to verify the letter; what say you, Mr. Ponder."

"That point has been already attended to, Sir William, but not with immediate success. The old Marquis of Lorndale could, I believe, vouch for the genuineness of the letter."

"Yes; but you see his interests point the other way. However, I raise no objection on that score; the government archives, and various other sources, independently of the old marquis, must possess several specimens of the undisputed handwriting of the fourth Earl of Wildermere, who was our ambassador at the court of Vienna, and subsequently a cabinet minister."

"I think, too," said Mr. Flanders, "that we ought to have the marriage certificate. I am speaking of a case that would be safe to win. What is your opinion, Mr. Attorney?"

"It would be better if we had it, no doubt: but were that letter once proved to be Wildermere's, I cannot see where any real difficulty would present itself. The glove is a curious point; I wish we had its fellow from what may be termed the other side.

It would be an amusing and interesting point in the public inquiry."

"Well, Mr. Ponder, my opinion is that the matter should not be pressed forward too hastily; a few weeks of active research may do much. I think Mrs. Dove should be more carefully interrogated as to her recollections of her grandmother, and the confirmation of Wildermere's letter, if possible, determined."

"I, too, am of opinion that a fuller case might be got up. You must go to work again, Mr. Ponder. So far as you have gone the proofs are pretty clear, but not entirely so, they want strengthening."

"For my part," said Oberon, "I could well let the entire matter drop. I do not care for the estates, and the title would not add to my happiness."

"But we must defeat that Cubborn. This depends, remember, most on your success. The suit in Chancery, I understand, must, unless some further revelations be made, terminate in his favour."

With this and a few general observations on unimportant subjects—the new opera among the rest—the consultation came to an end.

"Ah!" said Iris, when she had learnt the result of the conference, "I see I must take the matter in hand myself. I will see my mother."

Accordingly she did so without loss of time, and began somewhat in the following manner;—

"Mother, it has often surprised me that with your habits of keeping old scraps and saving up trifles you have never kept anything your grandmother may

have left you in reference to Earl Wildermere's wife. I speak of his first and real wife."

"Well, my dear, your surprise may be very natural; but are you sure that I have nothing belonging to the lady?"

"Have you? Then give it me! Where is it?"

"Safe, you may be sure."

"Within the lock? Off with them all!"

"No, not this time. 'Tis only a glove—a right hand embroidered silk one."

"A glove! Good heavens! Why, did you not know that we have the fellow to it?"

"No! I know nothing. Who should tell me?"

"Go, dear mother, and fetch me that identical glove. How wonderful, to be sure!"

"There—there it is, safe and sound, as I received it. Look, Iris! There is my grandmother's handwriting labelled on it. This glove was Lady Wildermere's once, the foreign wife of the fourth earl. How you ought to thank my thrifty saving habits!"

"Oh! I eternally thank you, dear mamma. But have you nothing more? No scrap of the Earl's handwriting?"

"No, not a shred. Poor fellow! When it was found out that he was eternally scribbling he was not allowed the use of pens, ink, or paper, fearful his story might go beyond his place of confinement. But he was, I understood, a great writer of letters in his time. Many of these must be in existence. The Wheatleys and the old marquis must have some of them."

"I know; but they are the wrong parties to apply to."

"Well, dear, will you place your whole case before me? Tell me all, from the very beginning. What are your hopes? What are your proofs? You know you can confide in me. I am master of my own tongue."

"Well, mother, I will explain all."

So saying, Iris went through the case from the commencement, giving the entire history, together with the recent observations of counsel. "What do you think, dear mother?"

"Well, I think one thing, and I have often thought it; for I have heard much of that Earl of Wildermere's habits of secrecy."

"But what is it you do think, mother? I am impatient."

"You should not be impatient, but listen. First, I ought to tell you why I was opposed to your marriage with Oberon. I did not love the name of Spell. My grandfather nearly lost his life through it—I mean the word. I was once with him when the mad earl was present, and I asked my grandfather to *spell* 'madam' backwards in fun. The moment the earl heard the word 'spell' he burst into a horrid rage, and nearly strangled my poor grandfather. So I had reason to dread the name, and I thought it was attended with an evil omen to our race. And now for the matter of your impatience. It is, that the back should be carefully removed from that brooch, Iris."

"Why, it is fixed in with the rest of the gold, the frame and that are one piece."

"As much as a sovereign is! Give it to a goldsmith, Iris, one of high character, and let him open it in the presence of competent witnesses. I do not know, but I suspect it contains something. Do that, and let Oberon see the old Marquis of Lorn-dale. This might bring you to your journey's end."

"Thanks, dear mother. Your excellent advice shall be followed."

Oberon approved of the suggestion made, and so did Mr. Ponder, to whom the matter was communicated. The family jeweller was consulted, and he, on examining the brooch, said it was most unlikely that it contained anything beyond some inferior metal to fill up an interstice. Such also was the opinion of his manager. However, their practical goldsmith was called in, and he was of a different opinion, and was directed to open the brooch. This was done in the presence of Oberon, Iris, Mr. Ponder, and the jeweller and his manager. The operation in itself had its own interest, as well as the mystery the brooch was said to conceal. The skilful workman carefully examined the article with his glass, and said, "I think it will not be necessary to remove the back. I can get to the inside by a shorter way."

"And without injury to anything, of course?" said Mr. Ponder.

"That is part of his trade, my dear sir," said the jeweller, rather pompously. "But, Skidmore, be careful."

"I will, sir." And he proceeded to raise the frame in the most delicate and cautious manner, succeeding in about a quarter of an hour in ex-

tracting the miniature. The interior was then disclosed. It contained a small, very flat fold of paper."

"Do not move the contents, whatever they are," said Mr. Ponder, hastily, "but under direction. Now take the paper out and hand it to Mr. Spell, this gentleman; and bear in mind this is Thursday, the 11th of June, 18—"

The man did as he was directed.

"Now," said Mr. Ponder, "perhaps you, sir, (to Oberon) will open the paper, and read it in the presence of all here. The whole affair is confidential, as we have previously understood," continued Mr. Ponder, looking at the jeweller.

"Perfectly so. Ours is a confidential business. A valuable work might be written on the mysteries of the gold trade."

Doubtless his audience were of the same opinion. But they were now more interested in the proceedings of the gentleman who held the brooch and paper in his hand. Oberon slowly and carefully unfolded the paper. It was an exact copy of the letter found in the Registry in France, and within it was the certificate of the marriage of the fourth Earl of Wildermere with Margherita Spell.

Oberon and Iris were pale from excitement. The jeweller became still more deferential than he had been. A smile of joy passed across the countenance of Mr. Ponder. He was the first to speak.

"Looking once more at that brooch, Mr. Skidmore, are you of opinion that it had not been recently opened?"

"I should say it had not been opened since it

was first put out of hand. He was a clever man who did the work, and that work, trust me, has not been disturbed by any one but me."

"Bear what you say in mind, and I think every one here should make a note for himself of what has occurred."

"A capital suggestion," said the jeweller, and pulled out his pocket-book; his manager did the same. Paper was procured for the rest of the company, and the whole of the documents duly signed were handed to the solicitor. After a very excellent luncheon, in which Skidmore was permitted to join, the party broke up. Iris slipping a five-pound note into the goldsmith's hand as she passed out, and she said, whispering Mr. Ponder as she entered her carriage, that she desired to communicate with him before he took further steps. He would therefore await her instructions.

That very evening Oberon and Iris, husband and wife, had a very long and serious conversation on their future prospects: Oberon was calm and undisturbed; Iris, it must be owned, approached the heights of grandeur with awe and trepidation. There was only a narrow strait between them and the peerage now; should they pass it? They had been so happy—so prosperous! How often had she seen instances of persons attaining the highest point of their ambition and then dropping off discontented and even miserable. Might not this be their lot? "I almost wish, dear Oberon, that the last proofs had not been found, the excitement of search was so delightful."

"There are other considerations, Iris, why I should not be in a hurry to grasp a coronet."

"A nice word that—a coronet—Oberon!"

"I am not dazzled with it. Provided we secure the property to Bertram or my rightful heir, when I shall be no more, will not that be sufficient?"

"If, my love, we could be sure to be as happy as we are now, I own I should like to have the whole affair arranged during our lifetime. But I am really superstitious as to the change."

"I look upon the matter in a different light, Iris. I do not wish to dispossess Earl Summers."

"Nonsense, Oberon! You know that it is Cub-born you are to dispossess."

"I am not so sure of that. I have my hopes that the gang of conspirators by whom Earl Summers was swindled, and myself persecuted and robbed, will be broken up. Sir Roger Wheatley and I had a long conversation on the subject last evening at the club."

"Well, what did he reveal?"

"Nothing further than the assurance of Sir Peter Spry, that such effective steps were taken now that the rascally combination must soon be discovered."

"You did not, I hope, consult him about the peerage?"

"No, certainly; it is understood on all sides that the claim is to remain a secret. Although, after the revelation at that jeweller's, it can scarcely continue to be long so now. But there is a delicacy about this matter, Iris, as respects Sir Roger and Lady Wheatley in particular, and——"

"Ah, I see! Ernestine! Poor thing, you do not wish to wound her feelings. Well, dear, she is indeed sufficiently crushed already; and though we have been somewhat rivals"—here Iris laughed—"I truly feel for her. But do you know, if I interpret that lady's heart aright, she would not regret that Oberon Spell or Earl Wildermere were the lord of her destiny—that you possessed Edelstone, I mean."

"I do not wish to test her feelings in that direction, Iris; it must not be. Summers is childless, and cannot interpose any future obstacles to my son's title."

"Well, dear Oberon, do you know what I intend to do?"

"No, love."

"Why, I will go to old Lorndale and communicate the whole affair to him, asking his advice."

"But do you not perceive how his interest lies the other way?"

"Assuredly; but he will counsel me candidly. I myself, perhaps, under all circumstances, would prefer a quiet arrangement of some kind."

"Would it not be preferable that I should meet him alone?"

"No, Oberon. Somehow I perceive your heart is engaged in this affair—not disloyally, but still tenderly. You blush! Ah, rogue, have I discovered you? Never mind, pet; we are but human, and Oberon Spell is not yet quite an angel. Come, we will go together. I will get all the documents from Ponder, and take them with us."

“ Had they not better remain in his hands? It is dangerous moving them. What, should they be stolen from us or lost during our journey?”

“ Then they must steal me too with them, my dear. The precious treasures shall not leave my person—they are not so bulky.”

“ Well, my dear, as you will; when do you intend to set out?”

“ To-morrow.”

That very day Iris obtained the proofs, one and all, down to the gloves, from her solicitor, Mr. Ponder, on producing a note from Oberon. She, as a matter of courtesy, explained her intentions to the lawyer, the object of her journey into Yorkshire, and Oberon's desire to come to some compromise if possible.

“ But with the peerage of course?”

“ Well, I own I should like it, but I have my superstitions about it. I fear, somehow, for my husband; that peerage was not fortunate to his race.”

“ Well, my dear madam, I am of course only your minister; but you will not forget Cubborn's claim; and do let me entreat of you to be very careful of this precious parcel. In fact, I almost dread parting with it; so many providential circumstances have brought this surprising mass of evidence together, that they cannot be too safely treasured.”

“ The same providential care will still watch over them, trust me;” and Iris placed the packet in a small patent bag, held by a steel chain around her shoulders. She then took her leave of the solicitor.

The next morning the whole metropolis was

alarmed by the perpetration of a most daring and extraordinary burglary in the chambers of Mr. Ponder, solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn. The thief or thieves had made an entry through the double door on the outside, and then proceeded to open every box in the rooms, rummaging them completely, and in particular that marked "Mr. Oberon Spell." The safe was prised open with masterly skill, sharp cutting tools—irresistible, it would appear—having been used to win a way to the interior. There were no visible signs of hurry, no unnecessary disorder. The most wonderful part of the affair was, that nothing whatever was stolen. There happened to be no money on the premises, and the sole pursuit of the burglars in this formidable enterprize had evidently failed. The treasures they sought had flown. Mr. Ponder lost nothing; all his deeds and papers remained intact. This was a subject of congratulation. It cannot be denied, however, that the lawyer received an alarming shock. In future what would be safe? Locks and bolts were no security. But he thanked God that the proofs of Oberon Spell's claim—the treasure, no doubt, aimed at by the thieves—were in the hands of one who appeared to be born to bring the whole of this strange mystery to a happy conclusion.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHAPTER OF EVIL.



IT was in vain that Mrs. Cubborn resolved to put an end to the partnership, as she called the most dangerous commercial conspiracy which had ever existed. It was convenient and necessary to drop its operations for a time; but the temptation to realize vast sums of money in what had now become with the gang a regular way of trade, was too great to be overcome even by the chief in her strong secret aspirations. Besides, guilt has many ramifications. The business had of late extended itself widely abroad. There was no country on the Continent wholly unaffected by it. The forged bills turned up everywhere, but always so surrounded with apparent respectability and sometimes real power, and, for the most part, genuine innocence of their character by parties concerned in them, that the utmost vigilance of the police authorities here and on the Continent was not sufficient to trace them home to their guilty source, the forgeries themselves being such perfect fac-similes. Mrs. Cubborn was disappointed in her great hopes of vaulting into the Erlam Court and Blackmines property according to her imperial will and pleasure. The claim had to go through the slow ordeal of a Chancery inquiry. A vast sum of

solid cash had been expended to work the nefarious designs on these large estates. This money was all locked up now, and where it might take years to get at. It was necessary, therefore, to look elsewhere for funds, and what resource was more ready and more fertile in profit than the masterly pen of the forger? This forger, too, was becoming day by day more alienated from his mother. Since the discovery of his marriage, that mother had lost all heart in him. He was now another's, and the old mother-in-law feeling was strong in its worst aspects and characteristics in Barbara Cubborn. Moreover, she had no moral or religious hold of her son; she had undermined and destroyed those sanctions which make government of all kinds possible, and without which authority at home is a dead letter. Jonathan, too, began to feel that his was the real power in the conspiracy. The Swivels, and Wolfstein and Schnapps, were indeed of vast importance to the scheme; but with his mother, the others, he among them, could well dispense; or at least they one and all began to think so. She was only useful as a chief—as an absolute and final authority. But this, like other and higher institutions of the same kind, was not valued by the utter democrats with whom she had to deal. There was no intention of breaking with her just now; but the thing had been mooted, and the principal rebel was her own son. Fear, however, which keeps the guilty together, was the real bond. The conspirators dreaded a rupture of any kind among themselves, and this, among other causes, was one of the principal reasons why

Mrs. Cubborn, even somewhat against her recent convictions and judgment, still permitted the conspiracy to go on. She was in the eddy, and must be whirled around and along with its waters.

The authorities, however, both at home and abroad, were on the alert, and had their eyes on them.

"We are at fault, Gimlet, we are at fault, I tell you; this swindle has lasted too long," said Sir Peter Spry to the detective. For it was the custom of Sir Peter Spry to communicate himself direct with the officers engaged in very important affairs. "It was left to Picker and you to unravel."

"I laid the matter well, too, Sir Peter. That girl of Lord Summers, Charlotte Winstanley, I got her long ago."

"Yes?"

"I knew she had been in the pay of Cubborn; and I have no doubt that through her the information was gleaned which ruled the forged entries in the books and the deeds, the whole fitted so completely. Well, she is now gone over to Cubborn and left the earl. You may have seen them in the park riding together, or dashing about town in a showy phaeton."

"Yes, everybody has seen them."

"And poor Lord Summers is the laughing-stock of everybody. But Charlotte is still my friend, and observes her present man closely. I have a better one, though, at work for me."

"Who is that?"

"Why, Elizabeth, the servant-girl that was, but now Cubborn's wife. I manage cautiously to pick a secret or two from her; and his taking up with the other girl has naturally incensed her and made her more open."

"Well, what have you learnt?"

"Nothing, Sir Peter, as can bring things home. The gang is as safe as babes unborn; they must be deucedly clever, though, for cats never watches a mouse as Picker and me watches them."

"But what of this recent burglary?"

"None of the regulars did it. We have been about to all the houses, and none of them had a hand in it. A stranger did it; there's a foreign touch about it. Perhaps 'tis one of the gang."

"Perhaps! This does not look like close watching, Gimlet. Perhaps will scarcely do."

"We can't be everywhere, Sir Peter. Besides, they are nobbs, and mix with some of the greatest swells in the country; them Swivels and Cubborn are hand in glove with the Duke of Ayrshire and old General Pepper. One must draw it mild with such people."

"Well, you must still continue to watch as best you can. Something will turn up one day. Did they ever try and tamper with you?"

"They did, Sir Peter, over and over again. Now it was about one thing, now about another—inno-cent in itself, and mostly about young fellows in town whose doings they wanted to learn. But they wished us in their pay."

"And you, of course, looked to your superannuation."

"'Tisn't that, Sir Peter. No, honour bright!—'tis the sense of duty, sir—the sense of duty; it grows upon one, and is a second nature."

"Very well; you know your instructions, Gimlet—look to them." And the detective retired. Shortly after Picker was called in. Much the same questions were put to him, with much the same result.

"This will never do," said Sir Peter Spry to his secretary. "We have the Home Office and the country, as well as foreign governments, down on us. These detectives themselves must be watched. They are a bad lot. They pollute and corrupt the course of justice. 'Tis altogether a detestable business. I am sick of Scotland Yard and its tainted air. How much fraud, how many robberies and murders are at its broad gate!"

Thus on one side the work of observation was going on. But the partnership might well defy detection. No living soul but Barbara Cubborn could unravel the whole; and even she, mistress as she was of every secret, could not bring actual legal guilt home to either of her colleagues. Throughout the most extensive operations the simplest means were used, as if everything was genuine. There was nothing to implicate the members of the partnership. The leading post-offices of England, the Continent, and America were employed for transmitting information. This was generally of the usual plain business character. Where secrecy was required, a cipher was used, written always in a

feigned hand, and addressed to some ordinary name (there was a new one for every day in the year), and the letter was to the care of somebody—one of the numerous sobriquets of the partners, understood only by themselves—and was further guarded by only reaching its final destination through the indirect channel of some convenient house where the letters were called for. These private communications were rare ; but if bared to the world they would leave nothing for guilty discovery. The conspiracy, therefore, went still on, and was everywhere triumphant.

But a terrible blow had already been dealt the Cubborns. Just as they became aware that the Chancery suit must be decided in their favour, and that the pretexts for delay on the part of Earl Summers were very nearly exhausted, information reached them through the Swivels of the extraordinary but powerful claim of Oberon Spell to the entire property. The fashionable West-end jeweller in whose presence the brooch had been opened, boasted of the affair in confidence to his friends and co-tradesmen, and thus let loose the secret where it was most likely to become a matter of the very highest interest and importance. No time was to be lost. Where were all these grand proofs kept ? In whose safe custody were they reposed ? No doubt at Mr. Ponder's, the lawyer's. To ascertain this fact beyond dispute was not a great difficulty in an office where minor agents had to be employed. There was no intentional guilt or betrayal in the information communicated ; but it was sufficient to work much

mischievous. We have already seen by what a special providence the Cubborns' nefarious designs were baffled, and Schnapps, a practical burglar long escaped from Prussia, was the hand chosen to execute the daring deed of villany.

"Baulked here too!" said Jonathan Cubborn to his mother. "Oh! curses on them! Go here, go there, go anywhere and everywhere, it is all Oberon Spell! I wish I had never been born, or he never born! He maimed my body—he will hang me yet, I know it! You have ruined me, old woman!"

"No more of this, no more 'old woman,' I tell you, or—— But I command you to be silent, sir, and hear me."

"No, I will not be silent. You have driven me mad! You have made a forger and a robber of me! And now you want me to be calm, and to sneak out of the whole affair, I suppose."

"No, I do not. But this is no time for vain lamentations. Where are those proofs now? Have you ascertained?"

"Here, here in Edelstone. The whole family—Spell, Iris, children and all! They are going somewhere, and the children are to stop, some with Allerton, and some with their grandmother Trensham, while their parents are away. But the whole—father, mother, and all the gang—are to sleep to-night at Allerton's."

"The papers are all with Iris," said Mrs. Cubborn, slowly.

"They are; but how to get at them! Spell is my Nemesis, I tell you! Why am I not as other

men—respected and honoured? Why am I not even as my own father? His days now glide on in peace and happiness.”

“You think so.”

“I know it. He has another child; this time a daughter.”

“Reptile! You sting me! But you had better not go too far. You were wise to heed what I say. The papers are in the hands of Oberon or Iris Spell.”

“Yes, he has the proofs and twelve children to back them! His name is legion!”

“You wander from the point.”

“No, I do not. I would destroy him and her too—her I thoroughly hate—tread them out as I would a worm. But their death would not compass the tribe. Eight boys and four girls; my stars, what a litter of whelps to bay and bite us!”

“The proofs, I repeat, are in the hands of Oberon or Iris!”

“Well, I have thought of this too. I shall get at them, or—— No matter. My measures are taken!”

“I hope you do not mean any extreme or unnecessary course—anything, Jonathan, beyond the bare recovery of the documents?”

“Peace, old—— But I must not say that. I tell you it must be cleanly done—this is your nice, proper word. It shall be, if I can help it. No hitch—nothing for after proof or legal puzzle. Thanks to your teaching, I know my business—eh, mother? The soldier has to do twenty times worse on those who never injured him. These are my

enemies! I go to exterminate my foes!—a brave warrior! Ha! ha! ha! Give me your devil's blessing, mother, and all will be well! I shall return home in triumph.

‘See the conquering hero comes!’”

With this gay and forward-moving sacred note ringing from his coarse, blasphemous lips, Jonathan Cubborn rushed from his mother, and was soon far away in the heart of Islington, where he had a private lodging.

The day throughout had been wet and gloomy, and the night set in stormy and with heavy showers of rain. No one would be willingly out on such a night. It was real night, without a moon-streak or a star-twinkle to show that a bright world still lived above and beyond. The small hours came. Everything and everybody were at rest, save the regular night watches on their beats. Jonathan Cubborn had returned early to Edelstone. He was housed in his mother's house, in his own principal office. She had retired to rest, unwilling and afraid to meddle with the fell designs of her son. She was unable to control them, and she had only open to her a course of betrayal or to remain passive. She chose the latter.

The small hours came, and as they struck on the numerous clocks around, the murderer stalked forth to do his deed of blood and utter extermination. He glided through the darkness rapidly, keeping close to the hedge and long blank wall, always in the deep shadow, and out of the light of the lamps. He

drew near to Dr. Allerton's mansion. It was here where the whole family were housed for the night, and where, no doubt, the papers were lodged in the custody of that wonderful Iris. In a moment or so a small rope-ladder was adjusted to the rear of the garden, and Jonathan Cubborn, for it was he, was over the wall that instant. A few minutes more brought him to the drawing-room window, which he contrived to open rapidly enough in true burglar fashion. Around his shoulder was slung his legal bag, in which were now four balls filled with detonating and other destructive and combustible materials. He was soon in the interior. All was quiet as the grave, not even the sleepers' breathings could be heard in that large well-arranged mansion. He knew every cranny in it by heart, and never did a burglar work so deftly, so warily, so silently. But withal he was nervous and pale, a cold sweat bedewed his brows, and his knees knocked together. He dared not use the bag till he steadied his hand and recovered his strength, or he himself might be the first victim. But he was not alone.

All this time, Gimlet and Picker and another constable had been watching him closely but cautiously from the outside. He was completely observed; but the exact nature of his design was not as yet apprehended. It was thought that the bag contained only the regular burglar's tools, and that a clue was given to the affair at Mr. Ponder's in Lincoln's Inn. It was not doubted that the search now was for the papers. Nothing ulterior was suspected. Iris, in her just anxiety, had asked Gimlet

and Picker to watch round the house, and they took into their confidence the regular policeman. But when Gimlet saw Cubborn stand up on the landing near the bed-rooms, and that he was about arranging the bag as a sling to fling its explosive contents violently from him, he said in a rapid whisper to his comrades, "My God, I know his dodge; don't you see he is near the window with that bag as a sling? My life on it, there's fire-balls in it. Hollo! Cubborn, come down! What are you doing there? You had better quietly surrender." Meantime three fierce bull's-eyes glared on the assassin and lighted up the landing.

Jonathan, like his celebrated namesake, was equal to the occasion. His only reply was rapid action. He drew out one large ball, and quickly adjusting the cord attached to it as a sling, he flung it against the door of the best bed-room with a terrible energy. This was the fearful work of a moment. The next deed was to clear a road for escape. The crisis was a tremendous one. Now or never. The ball had taken effect—the house was in flames! "So ho! and now for you!" And he once more used a sling—this time 'twas the bag was aimed towards the three men in the garden. There was another awful explosion which shook the earth around, and in an instant the three detectives were distorted corpses on the ground whereon they had stood only a moment before in the full vigour of health and in the exercise of a perilous duty. All traces of Cubborn's guilt died with them. He, as

he had calculated, escaped in the confusion. The two explosions startled all Edelstone, and roused the inmates of Dr. Allerton's house before the flames could prevent their leaving it. This was against Cubborn's conclusions. But his intention was to use the three deadly missiles within the house; had he done so, from their destructive and inflammable nature, the awful destruction he had planned must have ensued. On hearing the horrid noise, Oberon and Iris—the latter grasping the papers, her treasure, rushed wildly from their room, which was not the one fired, to those where their children slept. They were all safe, and around their parents in a moment. It so happened that Iris, desirous of being near her children, declined sleeping in the state bed-room that night, and thus escaped the immediate vicinity of the incendiary flames. Dr. Allerton and the other inmates speedily joined the alarmed group, and the whole managed to get away, half dressed as they were, before the fast gathering conflagration could prevent their hasty exit. Then it was that Oberon gave immediate directions that Cubborn's house should be forthwith searched, and his orders were summarily executed by the police. It was in vain. The inmates, servants and all, were in bed; the house was at some considerable distance from Dr. Allerton's—they were quite in regular order for the night—everything in its usual place—Jonathan's boots, among the rest, left outside his door, and his clothes lying across his chair in the room. Those he had

worn an hour before were consigned to a hiding-place which no detective could discover, unless indeed the house were ripped asunder. Mother and son were highly indignant at the outrage, and threatened legal proceedings against Mr. Spell, who, as a magistrate, ought to know better than to direct this shameful violation of the law against peaceable people who were far his superiors.

The stir made throughout the country by the outrage and murder, produced a sharp remonstrance from the Home Secretary to the authorities of Scotland Yard and the Mansion House. The result was a still more active surveillance of the conspirators. They began now to be seriously alarmed. But the two foreigners were prepared for the worst. They had long been planning their sudden and profitable retirement. On one pretext or other they managed to collect the chief funds of the partnership, and large private deposits of the Swivels' and Cubborns', as well as of others, to an enormous amount, in the bank of which they were the ostensible owners and managers, and they of late had extended the mercantile operations of their special house, at home and abroad, in a sweeping and reckless manner, becoming debtors to various establishments to the amount of nearly two millions. The assets at their command would in a large degree cover this, but they took care to realise them all by degrees, had the bullion conveyed abroad, and with the balance in hand quietly escaped to a safe corner of the Continent where the arm of justice could not reach them.

The Swivels had immediately to become bankrupts, and the Cubborns were on a sudden reduced almost to beggary.

All these circumstances began seriously to prey upon the lawyer's mind. His fits of rage when in the company of his mother became sometimes wholly uncontrollable and appalling. He blasphemed aloud, and made the house ring with his oaths and execrations. During these paroxysms no secret was safe. He would curse his mother, and proclaim to the whole house both their villanies. He was mad, incurably mad in heart, and his brain was rapidly becoming disordered. At home, too, with his wife and children, he was equally unbearable and equally demonstrative and outspoken. In time all around him and his mother began to dread their presence and employment. One by one the clerks gave notice and quitted the office, and last of all, Trapper made secret and illicit arrangements with the woman Elizabeth, Cubborn's contemptible wife; and both, after securing all the property they could get together, escaped to America. Charlotte Winstanley had abandoned Cubborn immediately after the explosion. He was now left alone in the house with his mother, or occasionally he buried himself for days in his Staple Inn Chambers, with only an aged laundress to wait on him at the usual times, morning and evening.

Old Mrs. Cubborn paced her mansion, a solitary delinquent; her guilt had made it her prison. She was now her own servant; all her regular domestics were flown. One or two tradespeople still came to

the door, she paid for what she had, gave her orders in writing, and then retired to ruminate on her mis-spent life ; or perhaps had to listen to her son's blasphemies and execrations. She often sighed heavily and beat her bosom with her hand. Things were moving on to a final retribution, not according to the ways of man, but according to God's ways, certain and inscrutable.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD DIPLOMATIST AND THE YOUNG DIPLOMATISTS.



BERON and Iris did not experience the difficulty they had anticipated in obtaining an audience of the aged and secluded Marquis of Lorndale. The note requesting an interview was immediately answered in the affirmative, and, the morning after their arrival, husband and wife found themselves in presence of the venerable nobleman.

“Well, Mr. Spell, it is some years since I had the pleasure of seeing you. I recollect visiting Edelstone once when you were a little boy; and I believe I patted your head as we both quitted church.”

“I well remember the circumstance, my lord; it was one likely to fix itself in a boy’s mind.”

“And Mrs. Spell, too, I can remember. She was the pretty child who presented the marchioness with a very charming bouquet of flowers. We have all grown somewhat older since then. Well, now to business, for I am sorry to add—though willing to be thought a recluse here—I have little leisure. Men in my position who discharge their duties seldom have. The control of accounts, the perusal of letters and documents of all kinds, and the fre-

quent visits of tenants and others, render the time of a large landholder but brief for repose and seclusion, even though he should have retired from public affairs altogether."

"I presume, my lord," said Oberon, coming directly to the point, "you are aware of my claim to the earldom of Wildermere, and the consequences as respects the property?"

"Well, Mr. Spell, I have heard something about this claim, what is it?—what is its nature? Have you come to explain matters?"

"I have come, my lord, for the purpose of explanation and to effect an amicable arrangement, if possible. I believe you knew the fourth Earl of Wildermere well?"

"He was my most intimate friend, as well as father-in-law. That is now a great many years ago."

"It is as the surviving friend and kinsman of my great-grandfather, that I address you, my lord. I feel you must desire to see justice done to his lawful descendant."

"Unquestionably."

"And as the Shropshire and Staffordshire estates are now involved with the fraudulent claims of that man, Jonathan Cubborn, I hope there will be the less hesitation in acknowledging my title, if only to oust this knavish lawyer."

"But you spoke of an arrangement, Mr. Spell. However, would it not be better, first of all, if you will consult me in this matter, to let me know on what proofs you support your claim?"

"I have all the papers and other evidence with me." Iris handed him the packet. "This, my lord, contains the whole. But, if you please, I will take the matter by steps."

"Well, do so. The story, no doubt, will be interesting. I am all attention."

"Here are the proofs that I am the grand-nephew of Wilhelm Spell."

The marquis perused the papers handed to him carefully.

"Yes, these appear to be conclusive enough, and you enjoy a large property on the strength and truth of this argument. Well, dear sir, proceed."

"These papers show that Wilhelm Spell represented himself as the brother of Margherita Spell, who was married to the fourth Earl of Wildermere. You have the whole history before you, my lord."

"Yes"—the marquis continued reading. "But the tale is cut short. Wilhelm Spell does not disclose the place or circumstances of the marriage. He appears to dwell rather on the cruel treatment, he alleged, his sister had received, than as anxious to tease himself about this marriage."

"All very natural, my lord. He and his sister disowned the marriage; and for this reason am I called Spell. And, you remember, the old gentleman died before he had the opportunity of making the promised revelation."

"Well, death is an ugly padlock. It will come upon us all."

"The more urgent reason, I presume, my lord,"

said Iris, "why we should all endeavour to do right while in the way."

"Certainly, dear madam ; we old men, it appears, require sometimes a reminder of our duty. May I always have so persuasive a monitor. Will you continue, dear sir?"

"Here are the proofs of the marriage of Earl Wildermere with Margherita Spell. You will perceive, my lord, that in the letter from the earl, he states that there were three documents of exactly the same kind, copies one of the other. We have come upon the second letter, the third is still missing. But that is not important. You recognise the earl's handwriting, my lord?—it is bold and peculiar."

"It is so, dear sir, if this is it ; remember, I admit nothing. Will you please to continue."

"There is the marriage certificate, and attested copy of the entry in the registry, and the second letter, my lord. You will perceive that the signature of Margherita in the certificate is exactly in the same hand as the signature, Margherita Spell, preserved in the fragment of the letter found in the old trunk mentioned in note A. The remarkable point is, that each of the signatures was discovered in quite different quarters—the one at the small church in Brittany, the other among the papers of Heinrich Spell."

"Very good. Please go on."

"There is a miniature brooch proved to have been in the possession of the fourth Earl of Wildermere, and always supposed to be the likeness of

the lady he had made such ample search for abroad when he had become repentant. For he appears to have been a man of many moods."

"Yes, yes. You must remember he was my friend and father-in-law. I knew him well, as you may suppose. Your story becomes interesting. I have heard of this brooch before ;" and he cast his eyes rather slyly on Iris, who blushed to her eyebrows, but she immediately interposed :

"My mother, you will see, Lord Lorndale, had often heard her grandmother, who filled some kind of office in Earl Wildermere's household, repeat, that the brooch which had afterwards passed to the Maltravers' family, and which finally became the property of Ernestine Wheatley, and was by her presented to me—well, my mother had heard her grandmother declare that this brooch was reported to contain the miniature of the lost lady, and she, my mother, had seen it in the hands of Earl Wildermere. You will perceive by the dates and declarations that my mother made this statement before she was aware of the existence of other similar confirmatory evidence."

"But, my dear lady, whither does all this preface tend?"

"Why to this, my lord, that my mother believed the property rightfully belonged to the lost lady's own family, if they could be found, and that Ernestine Wheatley had no right to it."

"This might throw a rather clear light on certain proceedings," said the marquis, still in his quiet satirical vein. Iris again blushed deeply. She was

fast drawing near the true solution of the mystery brought before the Framton justices, and subsequently that at the police-court of Marlborough-street. She perceived her error, and suddenly paused, leaving the matter once more entirely to the calmer and clearer judgment and manner of her husband.

"There, my lord," continued Oberon, "is a miniature likeness the exact counterpart of the other. It is, you see, proved to have been in the possession of Heinrich Spell, who always spoke of it as the portrait of his mother, and whose letter confirms this statement. Now observe, my lord. On the one side you have the miniature likeness of the Countess of Wildermere, and on the other that of my great-grandmother, both representing the same person. This, I hope, is pretty clear."

"Not entirely so, dear sir, as respects the Countess of Wildermere; the proofs here seem to be weak and inconclusive."

"But, my lord, I should tell you that the marriage certificate and the letter marked No. 1 from the Earl of Wildermere were both found in the interior of the brooch No. 1. Here are the proofs."

"An interesting particular. Dear sir, proceed."

"My lord, there is a glove which by these papers you will perceive belonged to my great grandmother, Heinrich Spell's mother, and here is its fellow, which there is no doubt came from the fourth Earl of Wildermere's house, and was always said to belong

to the lost lady, Margherita, Countess of Wildermere. This is a wonderful coincidence."

"It is. Well, have you exhausted your proofs?"

"I think I have, my lord. I hope I have made it plain that, as the son of Bertram Spell, who was the son of Heinrich Spell, who was the son of the fourth Earl of Wildermere and of Margherita, née Spell, all lawfully married, I am the lawful heir to the title and to the estates in Salop, Stafford, and Edlestone, now in possession of the Earl and Countess Summers. We are aware, my lord, that you possess the immediate means of confirming the most important of these proofs, viz., Lord Wildermere's handwriting, and doubtless the likeness of his first wife, my great-grandmother, and I rely upon your honour and truth to assist the cause of right and justice; though as to the handwriting, there are no doubt numerous public documents to verify the handwriting of an English ambassador."

The Marquis of Lorndale smiled. He had been, as stated, our ambassador himself at the Court of Vienna, and had succeeded Lord Wildermere in that office. He answered,—

"I hope your reliance on me will not be disappointed, Mr. Spell. But you spoke of an arrangement, some arrangement that might defeat this Cubborn's ugly claim."

"Really, my lord, we do not covet or even want this title or the property. As you have remarked, estates bring large additional cares, and a title might prove an embarrassment or an encumbrance."

"And what say you, madam?"

"I am myself equal to the burden, my lord."

"Well said. Now for the arrangement."

"In order to defeat Cubborn, it will be necessary, I presume, that I acquire both title and lands; but I propose reconveying the Shropshire estate to Earl Summers, and the Edelstone estate to his countess."

"Then you would retain the Staffordshire property, and of course claim no arrears throughout; not that I am aware that there exists any source from which you could draw them."

"I agree to this, my lord, on condition that you assist me to my claim. There can be little doubt that you hold the key to whatever is obscure in my proofs. If you will act with righteousness and candour—and it was with a firm faith that you would do so that my wife and I have visited you now—the whole matter can be gone through quietly, without any legal contention."

"The evidence, you will remember, marquis, is irresistible," added Iris.

"The persuasive part is so, madam," said the aged nobleman, bowing. "Well, I am not accustomed generally to make up my mind at once. Will you, sir, reduce your proposal to writing? The pens and ink are before you." His wish being immediately complied with, he continued,—“When I know a case I decide after due consideration. I have had a long training and practice in this kind of cautious determination and action. But here I change my rule. I accept your proposal, so far as I can influence it. And now, to gratify you, madam, in particular, I will furnish you with another fac-simile of an object

which I hope will be as eagerly coveted by you as was its prototype. It belongs to you. I beg to present you, madam, with another—the third—miniature portrait of Margherita, Countess of Wildermere, and also with that third letter which was necessary to complete your small collection of Wildermere autographs. My own repertory embraces this large bundle of letters and MSS.; and here is a history, more interesting than yours, Mrs. Spell, of the adventures of Geoffrey, fourth Earl of Wildermere, and Margherita Spell, the beauty of Vienna, and his first wife, whom he loved after his own eccentric fashion, and whom he regretted and mourned for to the day of his unfortunate dissolution. I make you, madam, a present of this letter, duly attested by me, and of the portrait. The letter, I think, Mr. Spell may well place with the other proofs. When our arrangement shall be completed, I will hand over to you the whole of the letters, the MSS., and history. And now I regret that I cannot afford you further audience. We have had a long palaver, and I have an appointment at two o'clock. I will see Earl Summers and Sir Roger Wheatley, with whom I have been in communication on this grave matter; and to conclude, when I have consulted these important parties to our arrangement, I shall communicate with you—at—yes, Eaton-square, I believe?"

"You have my card, my lord?"

"So I have. And now, good-bye, Earl Wildermere in prospect, and you, Countess, who, allow me to say, will be an acquisition to our Court draw-

ing-rooms and exclusive circles. Good-bye. Your interest and confidence are both safe in my keeping."

The aged marquis accompanied Iris to her carriage, and once more bade our hero and heroine a cordial adieu.

The Marquis of Lorndale, despite the turn of satire in his conversation, was quite in earnest. He saw, with Iris, that the mass of proofs so strangely got together was irresistible; he knew the story was true; he justly regarded the arrangement proposed as liberal and honourable—the best, in fact, that could be obtained or effected, in order to baffle the crushing demand made by Cubborn; and he fully expected that his son, Earl Summers, would eagerly seize the occasion to get out of a sea of troubles.

But here he was mistaken. That nobleman, after leading a life of recklessness and libertinism, had now become morose in temper and madly jealous of a wife whom he so long had affected to despise and neglect, because she did not produce him an heir—according to his notion the only object and use of his marriage. He began afterwards to see her real worth as a wife. He would even now fain sue to her and confess his repentance and his admiration; but the words she had uttered about Oberon Spell, and more, the deep and intense manner and emphasis of that utterance, had infixed a wound in his heart which neither time nor circumstance could heal, and whose pain he could never cease to feel. He received his father's account

of the intended arrangement with much abruptness and bitterness, and said brusquely—

“No, my lord. So far as I am concerned, I had much sooner compromise matters with Cubborn himself, than with this upstart author and doctor.”

“What! you compromise with Jonathan Cubborn?”

“Ay, my lord. I know where your satire points. Yes, of two evils I would sooner make truce with that fellow—or felon, whichever you like to call him—than with Spell, my natural enemy.”

“You had better express such sentiments cautiously—I understand the detectives have been long at your heels. That affair of the detonating balls would harmonize well with this language of the bitterest foe to the heir to the Summers property. Beware, my lord.”

“I only regret the attack—of which I know you do not dream of accusing me—was unsuccessful. It would have buried them—proofs and all—in one quiet heap.”

“I do not dream, as you say, of accusing you; but you had an inkling that this tremendous iniquity was about being accomplished. Perhaps you were in some way an abettor; if so——

“No, my lord. I am not that villain. But at times my feelings are so wild and uncontrollable, that were this Spell to come across me, I fear I should slay him.”

“And, son as you are of mine, I should denounce you and hang you. No more of this—no more contemptible jealousy.”

“ Mine shall last, I swear, as long as my enemy lives. I will seek Cubborn, my lord.”

“ Again I say, beware. The police dog your footsteps—perhaps they have reason. But it is an eternal disgrace to the family. Beware, I say, how you justify their observation.”

“ My lord, I thank you for your caution. But your caution made me marry ; and your caution now would make me Oberon Spell’s slave. Never, while there is a path open to revenge ;” and saying this, Earl Summers swept from the room, leaving that calm, callous old man, his father, for the first time in a state of the deepest alarm and consternation.

Earl Summers was soon on his road back to London, determined to seek out Oberon Spell, to insult him grossly, and to make a hostile meeting therefore inevitable. He was one of the best shots in the kingdom, and made sure of the fatal result to his enemy !

CHAPTER XXIV.

RETRIBUTION.



RS. CUBBORN was alone in that large and now bleak house. Everything was dusty and dingy. The blinds were drawn down, but not always straight; the curtains were pushed back at random, and hung wildly. The grates and fire-irons had begun to rust, and heaped up cinders and the ashes of burnt papers were in them all. Here and there the gas was put on to a dim blue light, and a patent machine, which stood on the kitchen table, served for a general cook by the aid of a small flickering lamp which burnt under it.

Barbara Cubborn had not continued her course of remorse—she was left without spiritual help, and driven back by strong memories to her former infidel conclusions again. Her more becoming thoughts, bordering on repentance and Christian sorrow, had died out amid the dreary horrors which now beset her. She paced to and fro in her large bedroom more like a resuscitated corse than a human being.

It was midday, and yet the noise of a key turned in the hall door made an echo through the whole house. Mrs. Cubborn was joined by her son. He

dashed raving up the stairs into his mother's bed-chamber, where he was almost sure to find her.

"They are at my heels, those d——d detectives. I cannot move a step but they are dogging me. I will go out no more. To have those hell-hounds following step by step, place by place, from one corner to another, would drive anybody mad, and I feel my brain going. Oh! I curse the hour that I was born, and that you were my mother!"

"Why don't you be calm, and try and rest?"

"Rest—rest—with the black devil there before my eyes."

"There is no devil—have I not often told you 'tis all a fiction."

"'Tis a lie—'tis a reality. Can't I see with my eyes? I tell you he was there just now, and now he is grinning over your left shoulder—ugh! This surely is hell, and I am damned to all eternity."

"There is no hell——"

"I say there is a hell—there must be, for you and me to burn there."

"What has put this strange nonsense into your head? I never did. Oh! it must be that creature Elizabeth."

"Don't name her, or I shall set you on fire. My brain is already in flames, I tell you. Where is the brandy? Do, do, give me one drop!"

"Well, a little may serve you—here, I have qualified it with water."

"Oh! good, good; I am better now. Mother, I shall not live long. I fear they will hang me. Those forgeries—those fires—those robberies—those

murders. What will become of my soul—oh, my poor soul!”

“Soul!—another superstition. There is no such thing, I tell you. As the tree falls, so it lies. Who ever saw a soul? ’Tis all rubbish, boy—priestcraft and rubbish. Do you think, if I believed you had a soul, or that I had a soul, or people had souls, I would lead the life I have led? No, I should have laid up treasures in heaven—my home. But there is no heaven, no hell, no anything, only what you can see and feel and know and reason upon. We are but superior domestic animals, the first of the tribe—as they live we live, ever fighting or striving for our food, for our breeding-place, or for our brood. This is the life of man. You and I have fought a good fight, Natty, and the world is all before us yet—before you at least; and as to your crimes, boy, they were deeds of necessity, done for self-preservation, or to punish your foes, in the manner of great monarchs. Gimlet, Picker, and the policeman you did not intend to slay, but they came in your way to prevent your escape and capture you, and you justifiably slew them. Well, the saints themselves cannot call them a loss. You and I know how foul were their hands, soiled with bribes from all quarters; how many deeds of blood and iniquity have they not winked at; and that policeman, to my knowledge, was the death of his wife by beating and cruel treatment. They died, as many a better man, in the discharge of their duty—to face death and danger is a part of their calling. No fear of them now.”

"No; but yet I shall be hanged. The devil is drawing the rope tight about my neck every night. Oh! more brandy, mother, this choking is intolerable."

"There, you may take a little more. Tell me—what have you done? What have you heard? How is it with the world outside—with that claim of Spells?"

"Oh! it is all up with us there. We are nicely clutched, after all your fine plots. And those d——d Germans, I always said they would fleece us in the end."

"They were very clever, Natty, very clever. 'Tis a clever people, but when they turn rogues they are a match for the old gentleman."

"What shall we do, mother? My money is nearly gone, and the police are upon me."

"We defy the police—wink at them and spit at them. What is the madman doing with that blind?"

"I am raising it, to be sure. I don't want to be smothered here in the dim twilight with the black devil and you for companions. Light and air—light and air, I say. I will have the window open."

"You shall not."

"But I shall, old devil." And with one terrible blow the enraged monster struck his mother bleeding and senseless on the floor.

"There — lie there, wicked hag. 'Tis too good for ye. Curse the window: how fast it is. Ha! who comes along the road. 'Tis he! 'tis he! my enemy — Earl Wildermere — Master Oberon

Spell. Now or never. What, old demon, still there. How ugly she looks—ugh! I am glad she is quiet. So ho! my lad, I will soon settle your fine claim.”

So saying the maniac hurried to his hiding-place, and still adopting even in this moment of haste and fury all the usual precautions, he soon laid his hands on a pair of loaded pistols. Then he as carefully closed the secret panel.

Meanwhile, Oberon Spell, quite unconscious that from two sides he was menaced with mortal danger, moved calmly towards the Priory, his present destination. To get there he would have to pass Cubborn's house, and behind him, not many yards off, was Earl Summers hurrying on to come up with him, in order by accumulated insults to provoke a quarrel and a duel. Thus the scene presented itself, when, quick as lightning, Cubborn opened the street door, and rushing down the road with a horrible execration, discharged a pistol point blank at Oberon, who was now fast approaching, and who just at the moment suddenly turned round to see who was following him. That providential motion saved his life. The assassin's ball lodged in the heart of Earl Summers, who was now only a few paces from him, and who himself came out to provoke a murder. Cubborn, seeing through the smoke some one fall, made sure it was his intended victim. On the instant the policeman who had been set to watch him ran across to seize him, but the wretch, with another horrible shout that made the whole village start, drew the second pistol from

his coat pocket, "The hangman shan't have me—no!" and placing the deadly weapon in his mouth he discharged it rapidly.

The confusion now was frightful. Oberon Spell saw in a moment that Earl Summers was beyond all hope of relief, and he ordered that his body should be conveyed to the next inn to await the coroner's inquisition. Meanwhile, he gave directions that no one should convey the melancholy intelligence to the Priory, where the countess was staying, without first communicating with him. He justly feared that the shock might prove too much for Ernestine's shattered nerves.

While in one part of the road this awful scene was being enacted, in another a still more horrible sight was to be witnessed. The aged mother, blood-stained, half-dressed, and dishevelled as she was, rushed to where her son had fallen, for the noise had aroused her, and she had partly seen what was going on from the window. She now threw herself on the ground, and raising the mangled and gory head of her son upon her lap, began to wail and moan aloud on the public highway. But the hideous thing she clasped was not death. There was still a horrid life in that distorted, gashed face. With a sudden and super-human bound the monster dashed his mother back from him, rushed towards his own door, still yelling in the most appalling manner, but before he got there, again fell to the earth overpowered and senseless.

On examination it was found that he had broken his right jaw, the ball having passed through his

cheek, shattering his upper teeth and a part of the skull. He soon recovered his consciousness ; but it was as a raving madman. He had to be manacled hand and foot and bound to a stretcher before he could be lodged in the cell of the station, where a surgeon speedily attended him. In his paroxysms, and even in his saner moments, he freely spoke of all the nefarious plots he and his gang had carried on, and of the crimes they had perpetrated—cursing his mother as the fountain and origin of all his misfortunes. In this way he told at intervals the whole story of the flint, of the newspaper paragraphs, of the fire at Myrtle Cottage, of the forgeries, of the recent diabolical attempt at arson and assassination, and of many schemes of fraud and villany he had been concerned in through his life. This he did with wonderful succinctness and memory. Jonathan Cubborn did escape the hangman, but through long and dreary months in the cell of a madhouse he underwent the most excruciating bodily agony. At last, quite worn out with torture and mental exhaustion, he succumbed, to his last breath still execrating his mother.

As to that miserable being, she had but one remedy for evil, and pondered it, on returning to her lonely house, after seeing her son borne off howling on the stretcher. Whenever the climax came, and all hope was gone, she had always resolved to put a period to her existence. This she believed would be the end of pain. The police, she knew, would be upon her soon. Her son had said enough in his agony to hang her. She believed he

was now dead or in the jaws of death. The hour had at length come—the final hour. She held the fatal bottle of laudanum in her hand. Of late it had given her some kind of rest at night, and she loved it and cherished it as a cordial. It was for her now—she blindly thought—to bury her guilty life and the future danger all in the grave—from which there would be no revelation—no resurrection. But as she held the fatal draught still in her hand, and while the police, who for a moment in their confusion had lost sight of her, were loudly knocking at the hall door, she trembled and said to herself aloud : “ No—I have been wrong—wrong all my life. Death near us or upon us is the great light—the revelation and creed—we believe then. I see it all now, and believe it. Iris Spell was right. I should have followed up her good advice. I would have done so could it have saved him—but I could not, and it would have been cowardice to leave him alone in the guilt into which I had plunged him. Ah ! I know now and feel that there is a God—there is a soul—there is a heaven—there is a hell—I go there—there is a devil—I am his for evermore. And yet, oh ! God ! oh ! God ! oh ! my Redeemer and Saviour ! Oh good and kind Jesus have mercy on me—a poor miserable sinner. Avoid me, evil temptation. Let the law punish me ; I will not do self-murder.” Saying this, she dashed the poisoned draught from her hand, and resigned herself to her approaching fate. She had scarcely felt what was passing without. This sudden repentance, almost a mockery as it seems to be, is

paralleled by nearly all other fits of remorse, and professions of religious belief at the last hour ; very few, if any, who had been once taught a creed, die without a rapid return to it—when all hopes of prolonging life are given over. And, though such death-scenes are seldom recorded, they are very much the same in character as the final moments of this wretched woman. The child and the moribund have faith without doubt or quibble. Mrs. Cubborn felt she was about to quit this world, therefore she repented. And this would be, perhaps, a just account of the death of thousands who are said to depart in the odour of sanctity. The police in a few moments had forced the door, and were soon swarming all over the house. They were however too late. The aged and desolate woman, alarmed by their clamours and rushing feet, had fallen in a fit. They found her stretched stertorous and dying on the ground. Dr. Allerton was called in, but he pronounced the case one beyond all human skill or aid. Barbara Cubborn continued senseless at the end of her career, and died the next day in that same chamber which had witnessed so many of her machinations of evil. The house was thoroughly searched, this time by experienced detectives. The secret panel came to light. There was no very tangible evidence of guilt to be discovered there, but enough with what was known and suspected before, to have broken up and convicted the gang of conspirators. All the marvel was, that this close scrutiny had not taken place long before ; but the truth is, the detectives winked at

the frauds, and had no notion of shutting up so good a house of business for them ; besides, ours is a very free country, and the liberty of the subject had to be duly respected. As it was, the revelations made, when put together, left no doubt of the complicity and crimes of the six partners ; as dangerous a combination as ever disturbed, for a whole series of years, the social and commercial relations of a great kingdom. Cubborn's house was afterwards pulled down by order of its owner, Oberon Spell, Earl of Wildermere. The peaceable and innocent grass grows now where that abode of vice, crime, and oppression once stood ; this last monument of fraud and villany has been swept from Edelstone. Thus ended the career of a mother and son who had promised themselves wealth, power and distinction by perverting an honourable profession to purposes of knavery and oppression, and by using the simple gift of the pen for the most stupendous frauds and villanies. They stopped at no crime to raise up an edifice of greatness ; and now the very stones whereon their house stood — even the deep foundations — were uprooted to make way for the ploughshare, and the green sod which soon covered the whole area. Barbara Cubborn was a woman of great intellectual force, and of headstrong passions and will. She wielded the enormous power permitted attorneys, as it is to be feared women would use such occasion and knowledge, if allowed them—for indirect and unworthy purposes, not sanctioned and practised by men in their ordinary professional avocations. She

entertained some very wild notions of woman's rights, and her proper place in society ; and this, perhaps, combined with an over-weening ambition, was the true source of her atheistic notions, and of the fearful crimes she committed, and of which she made her son the pupil, the master, and the final victim.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CONCLUSION.

WO years have passed away, gentle reader, since the occurrence of the fearful scenes narrated in our last chapter. We are upon the end. The story is now about to close. Our object has been to present the main incidents as they arose, suppressing many minor points which, though true enough, seemed incredible. We have not attempted a sensation or a mystery. In this we may have disappointed many of our readers. But our excuse and apology must be, that we have only endeavoured to follow the course of truth and nature. If the reader has continually been behind the scenes, the fault is not ours, but in the course of the events we have narrated. We now in brief give the sequel.

After the necessary legal forms had been completed, Oberon Spell became seventh Earl of Wildermere, the peerage, though unclaimed, not having been extinct—and had the signal good fortune and honour to be introduced to the House of Peers by the famous Duke of Ironsides, the foremost warrior and the honestest man in the kingdom. The nonagenarian Marquis of Lorndale, and his son by his first wife, the Earl of Landon, who had been made a peer in his own right, were pointedly absent.

The open and admitted claim of Oberon Spell to the Wildermere peerage had placed the second marriage of the marquis in a humiliating position, and the subsequent events were heartrending and appalling. It must be said, however, in praise of the aged nobleman, that he did his utmost to make the assertion of his rights by the aspirant appear perfectly legal, especially when he found that the great family obstacle to the lawful inheritance had passed from earth by a fatal accident, which was an evident retribution for his own fell designs of violence and murder. To the last of his life the Marquis of Lorndale was a wise and able administrator of his vast estates—in fact, a kind of practical steward and farmer. And with an occupation almost solely confined to the improvement of his property, the venerable peer passed to his grave, filling but a small space in a vault assigned to the former owners of estates among the most extensive in the United Kingdom. His son, who had been long our Ambassador to the Court of Russia, succeeded to the title and property, and has proved himself a worthy descendant of wise and noble ancestors.

The Staffordshire and Shropshire estates fell to the Earl of Wildermere without demur or any delay beyond the mere legal formalities. It was in vain that Oberon and Iris pressed on their friend, the Countess Summers, the retention of the Edelstone property during her lifetime. She calmly declined the liberal and considerate offer. She was a childless widow—the only daughter of still very wealthy parents—and she could amply live on what they

had agreed to allow her. She was decided in her purpose. And the Priory, the beautiful park, and the vastly improved property—all had passed under the administration of their lawful inheritor and owner. Iris could wander there now at her pleasure, without asking permission or fear of expulsion. But with her, every disagreeable memory had passed away. She had many old scores to pay off, if she were mean enough to stoop to them. They were all wiped out and forgotten. She wore her honours with becoming Christian and gentle feeling, grace, and dignity, and left little room on any side for envious or ungenerous reflections. The part thrust upon her did not belong to her birth, but it well accorded with her nature. It was a station of importance, and of no little arduousness and difficulty; but in none of its varied and exigent requirements was the Countess of Wildermere found wanting. Her principal devotion and time were dedicated to her large family. In the care and management of these, as an able and judicious mother-familias, she had few superiors or equals, and her administration of her numerous servants and households was in itself a model, and might have made a text-book of domestic government.

Oberon himself took charge of the estates and attended to his senatorial duties. He proved to be an admirable landlord, and was felt to be a valuable acquisition to the legislature. Brief as had been his career in the House of Lords at the time of which we are writing, he succeeded in making some very powerful and telling speeches, always riveting

attention by his vast and accurate accumulation of facts and the close and cogent character of his arguments. Indeed, it was more than once hinted by the Premier that his presence in the cabinet would be considered a great advantage to the public administration. But the Earl steadily declined the honour. He had a great purpose to achieve—a mission to fulfil. Iris his wife was now his prompter and inspirer. Oberon Spell was a poet, a born poet, one of the highest of God's ministers; and his grand work, "THE CONQUEST," had yet to be accomplished. Every moment of his scant leisure was devoted to his poem.

Hilary Dove was born to make a noise. He was nothing, if not on the surface. He only wanted an assured, a permanent and inalienable income, to maintain his forward position. This was granted him, and he soon began to make himself heard throughout the country. This time not as a Radical—America, he said, had cured him of democracy. The Earl and Countess, his children, for ever in his mouth, no doubt had their influence in turning him back into a sound Conservative. There was not, in fact, a truer blue in the country than Hilary Dove. He is a very old man, but an active and demonstrative governor at several important boards, and a director in more than one railway. The Merry Thought has long ago been pulled down, and a splendid hotel erected on the site, with Mr. Hilary Dove as chairman of the company who are its proprietors.

Mrs. Dove had not led a blameless life; but she

managed to keep her faults between herself and Heaven with wonderful closeness and tenacity. Nevertheless, in her own peculiar way she was an instrument of good, and her very silence and saving became aids in timely discovery. She still keeps herself aloof from society in a calm and quiet obscurity. She wears marvellously well, and is likely to live on to a hundred.

The Graffs are still humble, plodding people. Their rise during the lifetime of the successful artist has long subsided into the ordinary routine of honest, worthy tradespeople. Contrary to expectation, there is not a born painter in the family. The only member who gave any promise of artistic talent has been long a laborious Catholic priest, and is now doing hard duty in one of the poorest parts of the metropolis. He has little time for the pursuit of art or art studies, but he daily finds in the exercise of sacred duties and heavenly meditations the fulness and the glory of those bright imaginations which are ever the truest inspirations of the painter. He, withal, finds time for a sketch here and there, and he is one of the standard critics and judges consulted in the purchase of those pictures in which his church so delights. Agnes, the nun, or, as she is now called, Sister Teresa, belongs to a convent situated somewhere in the Midland Counties, and is constantly engaged in the offices of benevolence and charity. The Graffs, on the whole, are a happy people, and perhaps the most unhappy of them for many a day was Hugh, the famous painter and Royal Academician, who, with a fair prospect of success, had long aspired to the presidentship. Mr.

Lever is still a member of the House of Commons. He has devolved the business and chief management of all his engineering undertakings to one of Oberon's sons, who has manifested an extraordinary ability in mastering the most complicated details of the mighty projects daily set before him. He is the progeny of an earl, 'tis true, but he is a born mechanician, and his father has determined that his sons shall follow professions—one is to be a doctor, another a barrister, another a clergyman, and the rest of the boys are to enter the army or navy. Such is the present arrangement. The whole are to be carefully trained in the management of estates and property, as an essential requirement and accomplishment of their influential position. They will each have an income ample to live upon without pursuing any set avocation. But, brought up in the school of adversity and industry himself, the earl has made it one of his domestic rules to give all his sons professions.

Lady Frederica Lever has become very devout of late, and has assumed a greater air of importance since the discovery that her father was an English earl. Her husband, too, with all his practical and plebeian sense, does not fail to give his wife's curious story due prominence in his conversations. Their daughter, Mrs. Hugh Graff, spends the greater part of her time with the Countess of Wildermere, to whom she has become sincerely attached. All her own children are dead, and she has made herself a kind of second mother to the Earl of Wildermere's children. For the first time since her marriage she seems to be happy.

As for Ernestine of the blighted hopes, there was only one course open to her,—to dedicate her life to works of beneficence. For this there was abundant scope in every direction; and she, too, may now boast of the calm resignation and sweet felicity of the practical Christian. Her father has been for some time raised to the peerage as Viscount Stradmore, he having had some hereditary claim to that ancient title. His lady very acutely felt the degradation of her family by the discovery of Oberon Spell's rights, and the evidence of her grandfather's prior marriage with the Viennese beauty: but everything was softened down and smoothened before her. The secret that her father's first wife was living when he married her mother, never passed from the Marquis of Lorndale and Oberon's family. She is now very aged, and as far as she is able follows in her amiable daughter's humane and pious track. She has long ago eschewed the pomps and vanities of this wicked world. It is possible she grew weary and tired of it, or it had grown tired of her.

Doctor Trensham and his most estimable lady, the Dowager Countess of Wildermere, are passing down the stream of life noiseless and happy, blessed with the companionship, and the joy and gladness they find in their son's, the earl's, family.

Doctor Flowers has long retired from Cramton Hall, having realised an ample fortune. The school is now conducted by Mr. O'Kane, who has for some time been in Holy Orders. He married Miss Emily Flowers, with the consent of both her parents, and is now at the head of a prosperous establishment,

awaiting the valuable living of Edelstone, in the gift of Earl Wildermere, on the death of the present incumbent. Catherine Flowers is still the good sister of the village; she is a high Ritualist, and dedicates her whole time to works of piety and charity.

Little has been heard of Andrew Cubborn. He wisely has long remained in the back-ground. But it is understood that he lost not a moment, when a decent interval had intervened after his wife's terrible death, in making the woman who had shared his guilt and fortunes, and who was now the mother of his children, the sole compensation he could make to her undoubted attachment and fidelity. She became his wife, and managed, as we have seen, to escape the vengeance of the redoubted Barbara.

Dr. Allerton is still single, but it is rumoured that he will shortly lead to the hymeneal altar—we use the received term—the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and the lady is reported to be as accomplished as she is amiable. We wish him all the happiness of a prosperous and congenial union.

Mr. Ponder feels himself amply rewarded in the legal conduct and management of the Earl of Wildermere's large estates. Of late he has taken two of his sons and his chief clerk as partners in the firm.

Mr. Scrivens has long been the leading solicitor of Edelstone, and is now a county magistrate.

The other characters of our drama are either in their graves, or are hastening fast thither, and that is all perhaps that can be well recorded of them.

And now for the sequel.

It was a beautiful evening in the month of June. The roses and the fairest flowers of the garden were now in full bloom ; the air was pure and balmy, the sky without a cloud, and the water only moved as a gentle ripple. The Countess of Wildermere was seated in her own drawing-room—an apartment which embodied in its architecture, furniture, and decorations every feature of beauty. It had been designed, ornamented, and garnished under the special direction and supervision of the earl himself, and was accounted the gem of this magnificent mansion. The estate itself was situated on the southern coast of Devonshire, one of Oberon's latest acquisitions. Everything in that noble chamber breathed the soul of pure art ; nothing was unsuited, ungenial, or misplaced, nothing gaudy, or without a graceful purpose and meaning. The prospect was gorgeous and beautiful—valley and hill, cascade and quarry stretching forward in the ample amphitheatre to the interminable sea which joined the firmament in the far, far distance.

Beside Iris, Countess of Wildermere, on her right was seated the earl's mother, the venerable dowager Countess Martha ; on the other side was Ernestine, Countess Summers ; next to these on either hand, grouped around the table, were Caroline Graff and Catherine Flowers.

"I think, dears, at last we are all happy," said the Countess of Wildermere, with that glorious smile which still shed the old enchantment over her countenance. "I think we are all happy now. I myself, thank Heaven, am supremely so. The great

wish of my life is fulfilled. I see my grand, my noble husband with fortune and leisure to follow the bent of his genius. I best know how long and deeply he felt the privation of estrangement from his beloved poesy. I have known him not open a book of verse for years, fearful of waking sad thoughts, so keenly did he resent in the strong nature within him this cruel restriction. And I was the ogre who held him back from his paradise, I and the children. We had to live, and I saw that ruin and disaster must follow the pursuit of a vocation which made neither profit nor honour, and which required money and station to proclaim its true merits to the world. Yes, I was his disenchantress when he would wander into Fairyland. Nor did I then comprehend the soul of good and beauty there is in poetry. With Locke and other dry philosophers I set my face against the Muses, at least against such of them as would not bring grist to the mill. My poetry was my household; this my kingdom. But there was one, and I knew it, who treasured up his verses as so many jewels. She is here, and she too is a truly noble woman—Ernestine, Countess Summers. Nay, dear, blush not, rather feel proud and happy that through good report and evil report you estimated Oberon Spell's fame and character at their real high worth. And now I, the convert, will show you how truly and deeply I feel the grandeur of the poet's mission. These are his own precious words—my—our Oberon's."

The Countess of Wildermere, still seated, recited

in her own inimitable manner the following lines from a poem of her husband's:—

POETRY AND THE POET.—A DESCRIPTION.

“THE first-born, Wilhelm’s gift, was Poesy the blest—
 The pregnant soul of all things happily express’d
 In living language moulded from the glowing breast;
 The spirit breathing of its home of heavenly rest;
 Wisdom from the Holy Place;
 Grandeur hymning through lone space;
 Beauty’s song of classic grace;
 Unpremeditated speech,
 Far above the critic’s reach;
 Truth impassion’d, words alive;
 Nature’s honey in Art’s hive.
 Love’s pure and perfect voice;
 Dear music’s wedded choice;
 Essence of heart-sprung thought;
 Philosophy dream-wrought;
 The Bible of the Time;
 The lore of ev’ry clime;
 The possible
 Made palpable,
 In tongue of fire
 By Angel choir;
 The unknown track’d by inspiration’s clue;
 Great Nature’s utt’rance ever bold and new;
 The whole spontaneous, heart-felt, beautiful, and true.
 Earth never saw a nobler form,
 One with sublime instincts warm,
 Stand on the frontier of life’s storm,
 Than young Wilhelm, whose glorious brow
 Flash’d intellect’s divinest glow,
 Like orient light in noon-tide flow.
 And round the marble convex play’d
 Dark plumes of power, the natural shade
 Of that august, Olympian head.
 His eyes, the depths of ocean’s blue,
 With all heaven’s glory beaming thro’,
 And many a cloud of April hue.

The spirit of a proud war-horse
 Adown the fine nose' Grecian course,
 Breathed thro' the nostrils Titan force.
 The earnest mouth and graver chin,
 Even in their seriousness did win,
 By subsmile dimples hived within.
 The undulating, whispery tread,
 By genius desultory led
 Thro' paths with contemplation spread;
 To filmy realms of earth and air,
 The mysteries of this dim sphere,
 Show'd his lone mind a wand'rer there.
 The spell-bound pause, as if the thought
 With inspiration's burden fraught,
 Was in a dream suspensive caught,
 Reveal'd the moods of Fancy's child,
 The king of visions, grandly piled
 Up his Soul's expanse undefiled;
 A poet born to think and feel;
 The brain and heart of human weal,
 The lamp of learning, and Faith's seal;
 Who once ignored, or quench'd his zeal,
 The darken'd world will backward reel."

When the Countess of Wildermere had finished her recitation, and received the fervent thanks of her small but appreciative audience, she thus continued:—

"Oberon is now on his grand work, the 'Conquest;' when that is completed, we shall see how soon the world will acknowledge him its greatest modern poet—the true prince of his generation; that alone perhaps is wanting to make him as happy as we are all now happy. And why not happy? Oberon was an old flame of us all—nay, no blushes. I have something to say to you three—shall I say to you four?—including my dear mother. You all

loved Oberon—but I won him. You love him still—each and every one of you—the dear dowager countess among the rest—have at times interposed between me and my lawful possession. I was not jealous. I am not jealous. Such a paltry feeling of self-doubt was never in my nature. I want you all to love Oberon, Earl of Wildermere, as well as you loved Oberon Spell. You three are his sisters. I too am but a sister with a larger power; and dearest mamma here, with her wealth of mother's love, is not more. We own this spiritual affinity of the heart with Oberon and between ourselves. Our lives will be happy in proportion as we encourage this sweet sentiment, and occupy ourselves in doing good and promoting his happiness. 'Tis not because you are not all wives that you cannot all tenderly love. Henceforth, remember, we are sisters—thinking, speaking, acting, living sisters of one brother. Dear, affectionate bond! This explains the mystery of Oberon Spell's life; he was formed not alone to fill a noble station well, but to teach our sex that pure love and holy love for man claims ever and only the affection of a brother, and has its response in the soul and not in the senses."

The four sisters, with the aged parent in their midst, gave one another the kiss of peace. Here was a beautiful reconciliation. May it last! We see no reason why this spell of Oberon Spell's life should ever be broken.

THE END.

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